

Story Lengths – A Newsroom Strategy

Goals

- The newspaper should be filled with stories of different sizes.
- We need to show discipline in writing and story-telling. We especially need to pay attention to mid-range stories that are too long, given the underlying material.
- We want to give reporters and editors the tools to edit better for length, and we want to give page designers a wider selection of story lengths to help them showcase all our journalism better.
- A philosophy to live by: *Every story must earn every inch.*

Methods

1. A Rough Guide

The physical size of the newspaper imposes real constraints on story lengths. With headlines and photos, a page takes 65 inches of text. The only stories that run that long are projects. Otherwise, we must get several stories on most pages. To keep the paper lively and interesting, we must strive for variety – including some stories that are short. Through long experience with layout and design, and taking into consideration the news holes typically available on inside pages, we've come up with some guidelines for story lengths:

- A small event, or an incremental development worth noting can be a digest item. The digests are important for readers.
- A day story, significant enough to write for our readers but based on one event or development – 6 to 15 inches. We frequently end up with 12-inch holes in the paper. Let's use them to the best advantage.
- A single event with multiple layers or levels of information, 18 to 24 inches.
- A more complex news feature of ambition and altitude – 25-35 inches.
- Major enterprise, involving in-depth reporting or narrative story telling – 40 to 50 inches.
- Extraordinary long-form narrative or investigation, magazine-type stories – 60 to 80 inches or, rarely, more.

2. For writers

Writers need to take responsibility for earning every inch of their stories. Every writer should consider:

In structure, does the story move cleanly from one sub-theme or topic to the next? If it wanders and circles back, look for ways to deal with sub-themes one at a time. Good chronology makes for good storytelling.

Watch out for artificial transitions. They burn up space needlessly. In many newspaper stories you don't need a transition from one idea to the next.

To build effective, memorable mental images, pay attention to characters. Can you describe who we are hearing from, what they look and sound like, and where they are coming from?

Is there a high, clear and powerful nut graf? Even the most extraordinary narrative needs to get to the point. For stories on the front page and section fronts, we must get to the nut graf before the jump.

We must avoid repetition. Don't use two or three quotes when one will do. The same goes for anecdotes. Resist the urge to quote someone just because you interviewed them.

We are often saddling readers with too much recapitulation and background. In writing both news and features, reporters should strive to eliminate stale material. If you must revisit events to make the current material work, be sparing. Cast a cold eye on B-matter. Every story about a complex running issue does not need to recap everything that's happened. Write for readers, not your sources.

Show, don't tell. Can you animate your characters and recount events in a way that will let the scenes and voices speak for themselves, rather than using the reporters' voice to tell it all? Watch out for excessive adjectives that tell us what to think, rather than summoning real experiences and events that show us what happened.

3. For Editors

An editor on each desk will be deputized to ensure that we stay true to the principles we're enunciating here: compliance with guidelines, accurate budgeting, coordination with page designers and layout.

This editor will scrutinize lengths based on our common editing criteria and will have power to hold a story and ask that it be redone based on length.

He or she will make sure that stories on the budget have passed through this process. All stories will be put on the budget with their actual lengths as approved and edited by that desk.

The editor in charge of story lengths – and the person running the day on each desk – must actively engage page designers. They should visit the News Desk and look at the pages and available news holes *before* determining the day's cutback. The goal is to establish story lengths that will work both for the words and for the design.

If a longer story is offered for A1 and does not make it, and it is to be published inside the A section or another section, it should be scrutinized for length, consistent with the design needs of the section.