

# **The World Ends at the County Line**

A Guide to Writing Stories  
People Want and Need to Read

Stan McKinney

# *Acknowledgements*

This book is dedicated  
to my wife, Joan Cottongim McKinney,  
and my daughter, Calen.

Without their help and support,  
this book would not have been possible.

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ISBN 1-59196-631-0

Special thanks to the Central Kentucky News-Journal,  
The Sentinel-News and Landmark Community Newspapers Inc. for  
their support in writing this book  
and for granting permission to use stories

I wrote in their employ.

Special thanks also to Heather Davis and Daniel Kemp.

All of the photos in this book were taken by the author, with the exception  
of the photo of Jackie Pierce on page 216 which was taken by Calen McKinney,  
the photo of the author on page 235 which was taken by Calen McKinney and  
the photo of the author on the back cover which was taken by Joan Cottongim  
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- Stan McKinney was a reporter, photographer and editor for more than 25 years. He has been a university professor since 1987.

# Foreword

## *Know your community*

How important is a water line to the residents of Caseyville, Ky.? That's a question I faced on my first day as a reporter. It's a question I couldn't answer despite the fact I had a bachelor of science in journalism and was within six hours of completing my master's degree.

I was no longer in the classroom. At age 21, I was in the real world where people expected me to know the answers to real questions.

I had absolutely no idea how important treated water might be to Caseyville residents. Heck, I didn't even know how many people lived in Caseyville or where it was for that matter.

The question came up during the first fiscal court meeting I covered. And, that was during my first visit to Morganfield, Ky., the seat of government in Union County in far northwestern Kentucky.

I thought I had done well to find Morganfield, the courthouse and the room where fiscal court met.

When the discussion turned to a state grant for a water line to Caseyville, a small community in the western corner of Union County, I was venturing again into new territory. I had never really thought about where water comes from and didn't understand why everyone seemed to be so pleased that money had been approved for the line.

I gathered all of the information I could from the meeting, asked the judge a few questions and then headed back to Sturgis, Ky., about 15 miles or so down the road.

Sturgis is home to about 2,000 people as well as the Sturgis News. With the exception of Morganfield, Sturgis is the largest town in Union County.

It was Tuesday (I can't remember why I didn't start work on a Monday) and unbeknownst to me, the deadline for the weekly Sturgis News was fast approaching.

Since it was almost 5 p.m., I had thought about going back to the office, clocking out for the day, going home and coming back refreshed the next day to bang out something Caseyville residents would be proud to read.

My plans quickly changed.

The newspaper's typesetter was waiting for me at the front door.

(It was 1975 and stories were still created on typewriters and then

typeset on a Compugraphic, a massive machine once used by most newspapers to create neat, readable, justified type.)

The typesetter made it clear to me that she wanted to go home and couldn't do so until she had set my story for Wednesday's newspaper.

I stared at her, my notes and a typewriter that I had not yet had an opportunity to use.

Fortunately, the owner of the newspaper was still at the office. I quizzed him briefly about fiscal court, Caseyville and the water line. He made some suggestions. I incorporated them into my story.

I will never forget composing the story in my mind, typing the words on that manual typewriter with a faded ribbon and watching as the typesetter literally ripped each completed page from my hands.

There was no chance to read over my story before it was set. I was not able to check my spelling. I had to forget about tweaking my lead.

The typesetter was too anxious to go home. She wasn't waiting any longer than absolutely necessary. She was a veteran employee. I was as green as one could possibly be, and I didn't know how to use the Compugraphic.

I couldn't write as fast as she could type, so after completing one page, she was soon back to wait for the next. Somehow I managed to write a reasonably coherent story in about 30 minutes.

I realized I was in the real world where water lines and deadlines matter.

That was my introduction to some of the deadline pressures that are all too common in the newspaper business.

I later learned that Caseyville is a small community with a population of about 20 or so. Another couple hundred folks live in the area and would also benefit from the water line.

The water line, in fact, was a blessing to those residents. Wells and cisterns had been their only sources of water. Some of the wells often went dry. A few produced water that had a bad taste, bad smell or both.

There were serious questions about the impurities in the well water. Some of the water most likely wasn't safe for human consumption.

To the Caseyville residents, the grant for a water line was a BIG story.

Wouldn't it have been great to talk with some of those people?

An elderly couple who had used foul smelling water for drinking and bathing most of their lives probably could have given me some great quotes. A young couple just getting started and thinking about

moving away from Caseyville because “good” water had not been available would also have been a good source.

What if an industry was now considering locating near the community because of the water line? Great source, right?

Time did not permit seeking out such sources for that first story. I had to make the best of the time I had. I’ve also learned much since then. People like to read about people, the challenges they face and how they meet them.

How important was the water line to the other residents of Union County? That’s debatable. Certainly interest in the water line decreased the farther away from Caseyville one lived.

If the water line could have attracted a new industry, that possibly would have impacted many from a wide area. Jobs, after all, are an essential part of life.

Those nearby may have seen the grant as hope for their own water lines. Some may have once been in the same position and understood how critical the issue was to their friends and neighbors.

After all, they were all part of one community. They cared about each other and what affected one mattered to all of them.

That’s the case in most communities. People care about the news that directly affects them or their friends and neighbors. That’s understandable.

Hang out at Wal-Mart. Eat at Dairy Queen or McDonald’s on occasion. Attend a Little League baseball game. Drive down Main Street on a Saturday night and see what cruising is really like.

Talk to the mechanic who changes your oil.

Attend church. Visit several churches and talk to different ministers and members of various congregations.

Drop by a local nursing home. Chat with the administrator and residents, if possible. Chat with your dentist, your doctor, your banker, everyone who provides some kind of service for you.

Go to a fiscal court or city council meeting even if that’s not your beat. Visit your local schools. Make sure that at least a couple of times each year you visit every community in your county.

See and be seen.

Become involved in your community. Contrary to what many might believe, it is possible to join a civic club, coach a ball team, teach Sunday School, give blood and otherwise be involved without losing your objectivity.

Being involved makes you human. And that, I believe, makes you

a better writer.

Learn what matters to those who read your newspaper. You'll find those issues also matter to you.

I wrote the majority of the stories you will be reading and discussing when I was the news editor of the Central Kentucky News-Journal in Campbellsville, Ky. A few, and they will be pointed out, were written by me as a reporter for The Sentinel-News in Shelbyville, Ky. and as a reporter for the Sturgis News.

Landmark Community Newspapers Inc. (LCNI) owns the Central Kentucky News-Journal and The Sentinel-News. LCNI is a division of Landmark Newspapers, based in Norfolk, Va., which owns newspapers, radio stations, TV stations, magazines, cable companies and specialty publications all across the country. It also owns The Weather Channel.

Landmark hires good people and gives them the freedom necessary to do their jobs.

Campbellsville is located almost exactly in the center of Kentucky. It is the center of government and commerce for Taylor County.

Shelbyville is located a short drive east of Louisville, Ky. It is the center of government and commerce for Shelby County. Shelbyville is also home to corporate headquarters for LCNI.

The Sturgis News, at the time of my employment, was owned by Bud and Ed Calman.

Everyone I worked for encouraged me to know my community and to be part of it. They taught me that knowing and caring about what's happening at home is essential if you are to be an effective community journalist.

For the most part, what happens across the county line really isn't important. There are, of course, exceptions to that. Really big stories such as war know no arbitrary political boundaries. The trick is to relate the big story to local folks. You have to bring the story home.

That's why I believe, as far as community newspapers are concerned, the world ends at the county line.

# Chapter 1

## *General guidelines*

Eons ago, when dinosaurs still ruled the planet and I was in college, I did manual labor during the summers.

OK, I'm not really that old. I just wanted to get your attention.

I actually did do manual labor during the summers when I was in college. One summer I hauled hay. One hour of such labor today would probably kill me, but that has nothing to do with the point I wish to make.

My boss that summer was a nice enough person. He, however, had a bit of a communication problem.

### **Simple writing is best**

When giving instructions, this gentleman always took a moment and appeared to go into a trance before saying anything to my fellow laborers and me. After he regained consciousness, huge words with multiple syllables slowly spewed from his mouth.

My comrades and I often stared at each other and wondered what we had been told. Dictionaries are not standard issue for hay hauling crews. Thus, we had “a failure to communicate.”

I now refer to the BIG words my former boss attempted to use as “\$100 words.” One hundred bucks is still a significant sum today for most people. For a college student in the 1970s, it was a small fortune.

Had my former boss used “quarter words” to communicate, I believe there would have been no communication problem and our work could have been completed much faster.

By the way, we were paid for each bale of hay we handled, not by the hour. Most people don't mind wasting a little time if they are paid to do it. We wanted to pick up those bales of hay instead of scratching our heads in an attempt to figure out what we had been told.

One of my former newspaper colleagues once told me that a good newspaper on occasion should use words that “send readers scrambling for their dictionaries.” He believed that people could improve their vocabulary if the media challenged them once in awhile.

Any student who agrees with that probably would flunk my classes.

Why?

Let's get real here. How many people do you think really sit with a dictionary in hand as they read a newspaper? How many would take the time to find a dictionary if they encountered a word they didn't understand?

Few, if any.

People are busy. They have more important things to do than consult reference books when they read a newspaper.

I could argue that there has been a "dumbing down" of America. Broadcast news is short and to the point. Most newspapers are beginning to imitate their electronic counterparts. Stories are becoming shorter and simpler.

Like it or not, that's the trend.

I still hang onto the notion that newspapers can provide detail that television and radio cannot. What's the point, though, if no one wants that detail?

I'm not going to debate that point. That's for another book.

I do believe, though, that "quarter words" are better than "\$100 words." I also believe that our writing should be designed to communicate information quickly and easily. People are not going to run for their dictionaries because you have chosen to use a word they don't understand.

That doesn't mean we write such things as "See Dick," "See Jane" or "See Dick and Jane."

We don't want to insult our readers. We also do not want to create stumbling blocks that would interfere with the communication process. Know your readers. Know their educational level. Use various software programs to determine what grade level on which you are writing and the average length of your sentences.

Vary your sentence length. Normally limit yourself to one idea per sentence.

Remember, you are not writing great literature. You are writing stories that the average person can comprehend. You are not writing to impress.

Remember that.

## **There are many types of stories**

Much has been written about what is and what is not news. Most of us probably have at least a vague notion of how news, features, sports and columns differ. Some of us may not.

In each chapter, I will explore the differences in more detail.  
What is an advertorial? What is a sports feature? What is a news feature?

Such writing exists, and understanding the difference can be difficult.

## **News is something that affects people**

News has many definitions. It can be one or all of the following:

- It is a break from the ordinary.
- It is something that impacts many people.
- It is something that is important NOW.
- It is something that affects those who live in your community.
- It is something affecting well-known people.
- It involves conflict or controversy.

Most news stories are written in the inverted pyramid style – that is the most important facts are listed first, generally in the lead.

The lead is the first sentence or two of a story. It introduces the story and should grab readers' attention.

More about leads in a moment.

Details follow the lead in order of importance. That means the least important facts come last and, in theory, could be cut from the story for space or other reasons without affecting the overall meaning.

Taken to the extreme, if the lead is the only thing left of a news story, a reader should be able to get at least a basic idea of what happened.

## **The role of the editor**

News also is what the editor says it is.

What does that mean?

Odds are as a reporter your story assignments will come from an editor. That editor most likely will also help shape your questions and your final story. He/she will also decide what editing must be done and where in the newspaper the story will be printed, if at all.

In short, an editor can kill a story before a word is written or bring to life a topic a reporter might not have wanted to write about in the first place.

Every news story of any significance affects people. Determine exactly how it affects people and precisely whom it affects. Once you've done that, write about those effects, ideally in those people's

words.

The greater the magnitude of those effects and the larger the number of people involved, the more important and interesting the story is.

## **Other types of stories**

The Kentucky Press Association sponsors an annual contest that honors the best newspaper writers in the state. The association classifies stories according to 12 categories.

News is broken down by the KPA into spot and general news. The KPA also has categories for features, columns, editorials, sports columns, sports stories, sports features, enterprise or analytical stories, investigative stories, on-going/extended coverage and business/agribusiness stories.

Let's look at those categories.

Spot news is something that happens without any prior notice and for which no advance planning is necessary. Accidents, fires, disasters, murders, etc. would all fall into that category.

General news incorporates such things as coverage of school board, fiscal court and city council meetings. It would also include coverage of press conferences, groundbreakings, etc., all of which are scheduled and permit some advance planning.

Coverage of public meetings is so important for small newspapers that a chapter will be devoted to the subject.

Feature stories are viewed by many as stories written primarily to entertain. They often resemble short stories. Feature stories are usually not written in inverted pyramid style.

I believe it is possible for feature stories to be written about newsworthy topics. A news feature, if you will, would be more detailed and perhaps focus more on an individual involved in an issue rather than the issue itself.

Features generally are not time dependent. That means they could be published virtually at any time with no loss in their value to readers. The exception would be a feature that contains items that are newsworthy.

A column is normally written by an individual and contains his or her observations or conclusions.

An editorial is usually the opinion of the newspaper as determined by an editorial board. A member of that board usually writes it. The board normally consists of representatives from the various departments of the newspaper.

A sports column is the opinion or observations of the writer regarding a sports topic.

A sports story sticks to the facts and describes what happened or didn't happen during a sporting event.

A sports feature likely would focus on an individual and include details a story normally wouldn't. It's usually more detailed and, perhaps, more entertaining.

Enterprise involves the reporter getting out and digging up something new. It requires more than routine effort. An analytical story attempts to answer the why and how, something many news stories usually just touch on because of time limitations.

Thus, an enterprise or analytical story requires much more work and time than most stories and is usually original.

An investigative story also involves digging deep into an issue and trying to determine how or why something happened. It might involve hours of searching through files, tracking down sources or much, much more.

You might also justifiably wonder how this category differs from enterprise or analytical.

Some stories seem to go on forever. That doesn't necessarily mean they are boring. When Fruit of the Loom closed in Campbellsville in late 1997, for example, it took months for all of the effects to be felt. One could even argue they are still being felt today.

It took many stories to bring to light the full impact of the plant's closing. That's on-going/extended coverage.

Business/agribusiness stories should be self-explanatory. They are stories about business or farms. Such stories probably could also be classified as features or news.

KPA offers the business/agribusiness category to give more writers an opportunity to win an award.

All of these categories, it could be argued, represent a form of news. After all, news is something someone has not heard about, something that matters.

All stories, in my opinion, must make it clear as to how people are affected.

## **Still other categories**

I've already mentioned that a story can be both news and feature. That will be explained in more detail in another chapter.

There are some other types of stories that you may also encounter.

Let's first talk about special sections. All newspapers print them. Most reporters hate them.

I'm talking about special sections devoted to topics such as gardening, June weddings, winter car care and the like.

While some of these sections may be interesting and even useful, they are produced for one reason – to make money. Let's not forget that a newspaper is a business and must make a profit.

A newspaper that doesn't make a profit won't last long. That directly affects reporters.

Making a profit, though, doesn't have to mean selling your soul.

I believe that a credible, objective newspaper attracts and keeps readers. In turn, a newspaper with a large number of readers attracts advertisers who pay good money to spread their messages.

Advertisers may at times get angry with newspapers for printing material they would rather not see and might even pull their ads for awhile.

If the ad was truly doing something for the advertiser, the newspaper won't be the only one to suffer. I believe the advertiser will ultimately come back. The advertiser may continue to dislike the paper but will continue advertising because to not do so would affect his business.

Back to my point.

Let's say you are doing a story about lawn care. There are many interested in the topic, including me.

Within your coverage area there are five lawn care professionals. Three of them advertise in the special section. Two do not.

Who are you going to talk with for your story? If you talk to the two who do not advertise, there are two problems. Those two may believe there was never any reason to advertise because the story provided them with free publicity.

The three who did advertise might not do so again because those who didn't spend any money were included in the story.

Many newspapers will not include those who did not advertise as sources for such special sections. That's why some refer to these kinds of stories as advertorial – a combination of ads and editorial content.

I'm not going to debate the ethics of writing these types of stories. As a reporter you simply might not have a choice.

I am also aware of at least one newspaper that promises stories to those who advertise. A good friend of mine while in college interviewed for a job at such a paper.

Looking at that paper was an eye-opening experience. On one

page would be an ad for a company. On the next page would be a story about that company. I only had to wonder what the readers of that newspaper thought.

Promising stories in exchange for ads, in my opinion, is more than unethical. It is an abomination.

## **What do readers want?**

Readers, as a whole, are not that demanding. They want news that is relevant and meaningful. They want it to be fresh, well written, interesting and accurate.

That means spelling all names correctly. I have found readers can forgive a lot, but most would never accept their names being misspelled.

Readers want us to get all of the facts and figures correct. They want us to leave out our opinions unless we are writing a column or editorial.

Readers want us to be fair and compassionate. They want us to realize that stories can embarrass and harm people. They want us to tell them what they need to know. Sometimes they also want us to entertain them.

They want to be able to reach us if necessary. They want to know who we are and understand why we do what we do. Columns, I believe, can help us accomplish that.

Readers want us to get it right. And we should.

## **The search for truth**

Many reporters will tell you that they got into journalism to report the truth or to help make their community a better place.

That's all well, good and very noble.

But what exactly is truth?

Usually when I talk about truth in class, I put the word in quotation marks. "Truth" can be many things to many people.

Who's telling the truth if two eyewitnesses at an accident tell vastly different stories? Who's telling the truth if an elected official says he didn't take a bribe but a source, who has no written or other proof, says he did?

Some people lie. Some people distort the facts for their own purposes. Some people use the media. That's just the way it is.

There are those who believe high officials in the U.S. government

were actually responsible for the attacks against America on Sept. 11, 2001. Somewhere in my vast collection of publications I have a pamphlet that goes into great detail to explain why those officials staged the attacks for their own personal gain.

Is this pamphlet telling the truth?

Most people would think not.

I did a story once about several families who live in one community. Those on one side of the road refer to their community as Lemmon's Bend. Those on the other side of the road call it Lemon's Bend. The official county map lists the community as Lemmon Bend.

Who's right?

One of my bosses over the years told me "perception is reality." People sometimes believe what they want to believe and no one and nothing, even the truth, can change that.

All you can do is report the truth to the best of your ability. That means including conflicting viewpoints and as many sides of a story as possible.

Stories could have one, two or 2,000 sides. Some may also not deserve as much coverage as others. If 10,000 people believe one thing and one person believes something else, do both viewpoints demand equal space?

Probably not.

Be as fair and objective as possible.

Realize that you may be offended by what some people tell you. Treat those who do offend you or who challenge your own beliefs with respect. Show no favoritism. Question everything.

Stand up for your readers. Ask the questions they would if they had the chance.

## Using quotes

Quotes can transform a dull story into an interesting one. Tell stories through your readers' words when possible.

Some people, quite frankly, are not that interesting. Good writing is more than a series of quotes and some punctuation marks. If something isn't worth quoting or can be said in a simpler manner, paraphrase.

Quote marks, to me, indicate the *exact* words a person said. Quotes are what the readers would have heard had they been there.

Some might argue that the only way to get accurate quotes is to use a tape recorder. I hate tape recorders. They force a writer to go back

and listen to a conversation again. Notes permit you to edit as you go and to quickly find details for a story.

It is possible to take notes precise enough to accurately quote someone. Practice that skill.

What do you quote?

Something quotable. That means use the speakers' own words when they best convey the message.

Let me give you an example.

Let's say you are writing a story about a school system that did poorly on statewide tests and faces possible state sanctions. You interview the school superintendent about the situation and he replies with this: "We ain't got no problem."

That quote is not only quotable, it's your lead, your story and probably even your headline. A reporter who would not use that quote, in my opinion, is not worthy of the title.

Sure, the superintendent, school board and maybe even some members of the general public might be upset and blame the newspaper for embarrassing them. That's their problem.

The statement is indicative of a much larger problem and is the essence of the story. A reporter has an obligation to use it.

Most quotes won't be that good. But many people will tell their own stories much better in their own words than any writer ever could. Look for those quotes. You'll find them.

## **Writing the lead**

The lead, I believe, is the most important part of any story. It must grab the reader and entice him to read further. It must tell the reader why he should care about the story and why he must read it.

Journalists have understood for years that the lead should answer all basic questions – who, what, when, where, why and how.

Those five Ws and H will be discussed in detail for every story in this book. Another important W, who cares, will also be discussed at length.

It's difficult to say exactly at what point in the writing process a lead is born. You might have an idea for a lead as the story idea is taking shape.

The answer to a single question might result in the lead. It might take a bit of poring over your notes to determine what's most important and of most importance. Once that lead is written, though, I believe most stories fall into place.

The next most important information follows. Wrap up the story in some way and you're finished.

Sounds easy, doesn't it?

For some, writing is easier than others. It can be a chore, but hopefully it can become a labor of love.

How long should a lead be?

Many books I've read suggest that a lead should be no more than 29 words. I've also seen 19 words listed as a maximum. I believe a lead should be as short as possible. In my opinion, 29 words are probably too many.

One of my former bosses subscribed to what he called the mini-skirt theory. Forgive me if this sounds sexist. He believed a story should be long enough to cover the subject but short enough to keep your interest – just like a mini-skirt.

## Story length

Over the years, many reporters and students have quizzed me about story length.

My response is very simple. A story should be as long as it needs to be.

That's not a flippant answer. Stories must be complete. They are complete when all questions are answered.

Thus, stories set their own length. This is where the mini-skirt theory comes into play.

A very simple subject most likely will result in a short story. A complicated story that has many points of view most likely will be longer.

Think about the subject. Imagine every possible question someone might ask. If you've answered all of those, the story is as long as it needs to be. If there are questions that readers will have and they haven't been answered, you haven't written enough.

Features tend to be longer than news stories.

In general, a brief, simple story can probably be written in a paragraph or two, a half page at most. Stories of some significance probably require a minimum of two pages, perhaps three. At four pages, a story is starting to get long.

Features most likely will be three to four pages in length.

These are guidelines only. Every story is different.

If a story is too long, consider writing two stories. There's no law, for example, that requires reporters to write only one story about a pub-