

Science News Article Organization

Lesson

In this lesson, students examine the organization and structure of the science news article and how it differs from the five paragraph essay.

“Journalism’s inverted triangle structure requires that the writer determine the gist of the story, what details are most important (these come next) and which details come later down. . .”

SciJourn Standards for Scientific Literacy

Objective: Students will recognize the elements and structure of the science news article.

Materials: *The Inverted Triangle*

ARTICLE A (to be cut into separate paragraphs)

ARTICLE B (intact version of article)

Several business envelopes (enough for each group of 3 students)

A piece of plain paper for each group

glue sticks

Preparation prior to lesson: Prepare enough copies of ARTICLE A so that there will be one for each group of 3 students. Cut the article along the dotted lines and place in random order into an envelope for each group.

Time: approximately 50 minutes

Background

The structure of the science news article can be compared to an inverted triangle. Effective articles are front loaded - the most important parts of the story come first, with nonessential information placed near the end. Journalists never know if the last several paragraphs of a story will be included when the story is published (due to changing length restrictions) or if readers will actually read the entire article. The “extras” are saved for last.

By contrast, the structure of an effective 5-paragraph essay includes a clear beginning, middle, and end. This structure is similar to that of a joke. In order for a joke to be funny, the punch-line must always be included, usually at the end. If the punch-line happened to be dropped from a publication, the joke would make little sense.

Getting Started

Ask students what they know about the 5-paragraph essay. (Amidst the moans and groans, assure them that you are not about to assign one.) Remind them

that in elementary school this kind of writing was sometimes called the *hamburger essay*. List reasonable responses on the board.

If not mentioned, include;

- *contains an introductory paragraph;*
- *has a general theme;*
- *usually states a problem;*
- *includes a thesis sentence - what the author is trying to prove;*
- *contains three paragraphs as the body of the essay;*
- *must include a concluding paragraph.*

Tell the students that these ideas are fine for 5-paragraph essays, but they do not apply to science journalism. Have the students put them into an imaginary box, tie it with string, and place it in the backs of their minds. For science journalism, we will be talking about something different.

Addressing the Topic

Point out that a 5-paragraph essay is quite different than a science news article. It is a bit like a joke. To stress this, tell the following joke.

One morning a mother was trying to wake up her son. "Wake up now! It's time to go to school."
"I don't want to go to school," the son replied.
His mother said, "Give me two reasons why you don't want to go to school."
"Okay. One, all the children hate me. Two, all the teachers hate me."
"Not good enough," the mother replied.
"Fine," the son said. "Then you give me two good reasons why I SHOULD go to school."

Stop here. Ask the students if this is the end of the joke. Of course it is not - the joke needs a punch-line to be funny. The punch-line is:

"One, you're 50 years old. Two, you're the principal of the school."

Just like the 5-paragraph essay, a joke needs to have a clear ending.

However, explain to the students that a science news article is quite different. The end is not important. Ask if anyone knows why. Explain that when journalists write articles, the endings may be cut off because of lack of page space in the publication. Readers *must* be able to understand the story without reading all the way to the end.

Distribute *The Inverted Triangle*. Explain that the top of the triangle is the beginning of the science news story and the bottom is the end.

Point out, but do not necessarily discuss, the parts of the news story that are listed. (The students will likely understand these components when working with the article. If they do not, they will acquire a need to know.)

Lede (spelled correctly) - contains the *hook* to capture the attention of the reader. Might be a question, a brief anecdote, a surprising fact, etc. (Note: The spelling of *lede* has been used to differentiate from *lead*. Lead was used in printing for the making of type.)

What's new - all science news articles must include something new - otherwise they are merely reports. A new study, a recent event, a news worthy disclosure, etc.

5 Ws - the traditional *who, what, where, when, why* - and in many cases *how*. There is no requirement that the 5Ws be in the lede nor are all 5 mandatory within the article. To be included are those that add to the story, answer a reader's question, or eliminate confusion.

Background information - to contextualize the story - to put it into perspective. It helps the reader make sense about how and why this topic is important.

Details of work - additional facts about exactly what it was that happened.

Reactions and comments from others - as with all news events, there will be reactions from various stakeholders. Including those responses in the article adds to the story.

Future plans - now that *this* has occurred, what comes next?

Summary quotes - quotes from one or more stakeholders that contribute to the story, but not necessary for the story to be effective.

Distribute ARTICLE A which has been cut into separate sections and placed into envelopes for each group.

Instruct the groups to do the following:

1. place group number at top of paper
2. arrange article sections in correct order
3. glue article sections onto the paper
4. post the paper on the wall in the classroom

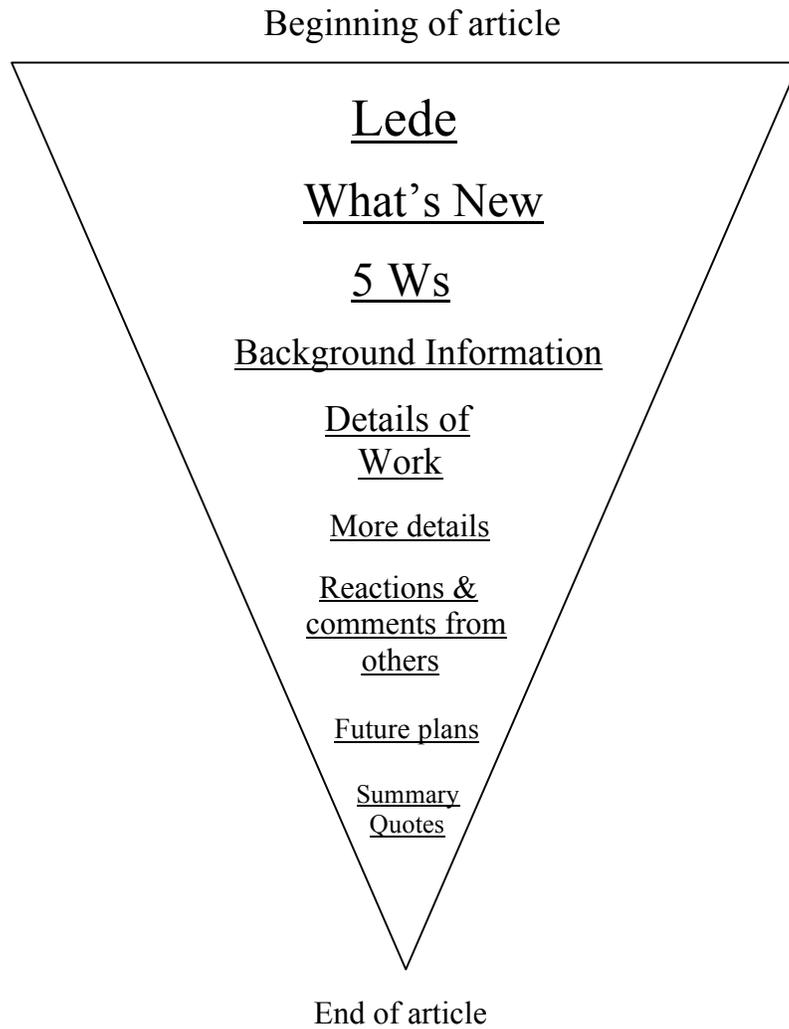
Then, have students visit the posted papers of each group and compare the order of article sections. Discuss why or why not the students agree with the order of other groups.

Distribute (or show on screen) ARTICLE B (intact version of article). During a class discussion, have students consider the order of sections in the original article. Do they agree? How was their order different?

Exit write. . . . Ask students to write their ideas about ledes and what they think should be included in an effective lede.

Note: As an assessment, look for students who mention that the 5Ws are not required in the lede. See if students mention the 'hook' to get readers into the story.

The Inverted Triangle



ARTICLE A (to be cut into separate sections along dotted lines and placed in random order in an envelope)

Over the last decade, the drinking water at thousands of schools across the country has been found to contain unsafe levels of lead, pesticides and dozens of other toxins.

An Associated Press investigation found that contaminants have surfaced at public and private schools in all 50 states — in small towns and inner cities alike.

But the problem has gone largely unmonitored by the federal government, even as the number of water safety violations has multiplied.

"It's an outrage," said Marc Edwards, an engineer at Virginia Tech who has been honored for his work on water quality. "If a landlord doesn't tell a tenant about lead paint in an apartment, he can go to jail. But we have no system to make people follow the rules to keep school children safe?"

The contamination is most apparent at schools with wells, which represent 8 to 11 percent of the nation's schools. Roughly one of every five schools with its own water supply violated the Safe Drinking Water Act in the past decade, according to data from the Environmental Protection Agency analyzed by the AP.

ARTICLE B (intact version of article)

By GARANCE BURKE, Associated Press Writer Garance Burke, Associated Press Writer – Fri Sep 25, 11:06 am ET

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