

Reuters Foundation  
Reporters handbook



## Table of Contents

- Preface	2
- Introduction	3
- The reporter's role in society	4
- Qualities of a good reporter	4
- Article styles	5
- What makes news?	5
- How to find news	6
- Presenting news	6
- Inverted pyramid	7
- Why do I care? So What?	8
- Identifying the lead	9
- Different lead approaches	10
- Ways to improve leads	12
- Key points in writing stories	12
- Sources	14
- Features	15
- Analysis	18
- Investigative reporting	19
- Interviewing	20
- News conferences	21
- Working with numbers	22
- Ethics	22
- Safety	23



## Preface

In late October 2004, Reuters Foundation and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) initiated a project partnered by the Spanish International Cooperation Agency (AECI) to improve the flow of news about Iraq available to the media in Iraq, thus addressing the serious information gap caused by the absence of a national news agency.

A web-based news exchange Aswat al-Iraq ([www.aswataliraq.info](http://www.aswataliraq.info)) was set up to enable Iraqi journalists and media organisations to pool their news coverage. The project also established a training and mentoring programme to help Iraqi journalists build their reporting skills and to improve their understanding of the democratic process, especially important in anticipation of the January 2005 elections in Iraq.

A core team of correspondents for Aswat al-Iraq emerged from the groups of journalists trained under the project and in just two months after its launch nearly 500 stories had been published on the news exchange. Iraqi media organisations were quick to show interest in the exchange and support strengthened during the next few months. By the beginning of June 2005, the total number of published news items amounted to some 3000.

This early success and steady growth have brought the project's news exchange to the stage where it can now be developed into a fully independent news agency. Currently, the project partners have intensified their search for funding to support the fledgling agency through its early development.

This handbook, written in accordance with the journalistic principles practised by the widely respected international news agency Reuters, is designed to provide advice and guidance on fact-based reporting for Iraqi journalists whenever they need it and forms part of the essential support provided by the project's ongoing mentoring to enhance their skills.

The manual was drawn from the wide experiences of Reuters' journalists. It is not intended to be a complete guide to all journalists everywhere, recognising that conditions under which the media operate vary widely from country to country. It is hoped that the handbook offers examples of the practices journalists at Reuters have followed in the course of the news agency's 150-year-old history.

From the range and menu of choices, readers are invited to select any section they find useful and relevant to their interest and field of work.

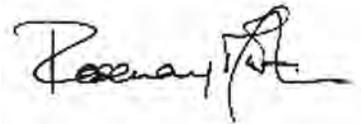
January 2006



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## Introduction

There is no universal code for reporters, for the way they operate, or are allowed to operate, varies according to countries' regional, historical and cultural differences. However, journalists generally agree on the key elements of what most people regard as good, responsible news reporting. It is the search for the truth, to the best of one's abilities in the prevailing circumstances.

The few main guiding principles are **accuracy, objectivity, honesty and fairness**.

**Accuracy** is crucial. If you fail to get basic facts right – names, titles and figures – readers are unlikely to take seriously any other information from your news organisation.

**Objectivity and impartiality** are more difficult. Many argue complete objectivity is impossible because our background and upbringing influence the way we select and present information in news reports. Add to that pressure from media proprietors with a particular political or business agenda. However, with practice, reporters can develop a high degree of objectivity.

For a serious reporter, **honesty** is paramount. It is easy to make up sources or quotes and relatively easy – and risky – to plagiarise reports written by others. If you start on this route, there is nowhere to go but down.

The International Federation of Journalists' code of ethics says: "The journalist shall only use **fair** methods to obtain news, photographs and documents." This means identifying oneself at all times as a journalist, not tricking people into giving information under false pretences and not using threats or intimidation.



## The reporter's role in society

An important role of a reporter in a democracy is to act as a buffer between the government and the public. It is a two-way channel. The reporter can explain government decisions and actions to the public and pass the public view back to government.

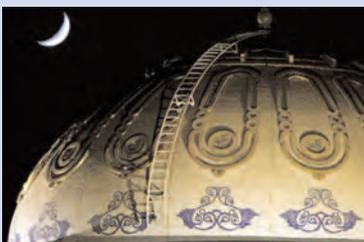
### The reporter has a role in:

Scrutinising the work of the government, the courts and big companies to highlight failures and successes

- Rooting out corruption at all levels
- Drawing attention to official negligence or incompetence
- Giving a voice to sectors of society without one
- Helping the public cast votes in elections by explaining political programmes of rival parties
- Explaining economic trends

## Qualities of a good reporter

- **Curiosity** – It is easier for reporters to ask the right questions if they are already personally curious to know the answers.
- **News sense** – Recognising news usually comes with practice, but some people seem to be born with it.
- **Perseverance** – Not giving up when struggling to find out information in the face of bureaucratic inertia, subterfuge or outright opposition.
- **Objectivity** – A good reporter leaves personal views and prejudices at the newsroom door. The reporter's duty to society is to inform, not to persuade. Give the facts, from all sides, as far as you are able, and let people make up their own minds.
- **Scepticism** – Reporters should develop a good measure of scepticism when dealing with officials, companies and other authorities. Sources want to give you information that puts them in a favourable light. However such scepticism should not become total cynicism.
- **Comfortable with people** – Most stories come from people. There is room in journalism for the quiet, introvert, but reporters who can mingle easily with all types of people have a better chance of finding things out.



## Article styles

- **News** – Straight reports of something happening now. They rely for their impact on the relevance of the story and the reporter's skill in presenting it. They have a short shelf-life.
- **Features** – Normally less time-sensitive stories about things that are happening, rather than things that have just happened. Situations, events, places or people judged to be of interest to a wide range of readers make interesting features. Such subjects tend to lack the urgency of breaking news stories so reporters need to attract the reader by a creative, stylish writing and colour.
- **Analysis** – An in-depth look at a major issue, supported by established facts and using the views of named sources and experts. Analysis need not reflect the consensus view and some of the best often challenge it.
- **Opinion** – Commentaries that usually reflect the political stance of the newspaper, appearing on the editorial pages, often written by specialists.

## What makes news?

One classic definition of what constitutes news is this:

*If a dog bites a man, that is not news.*

*But if a man bites a dog, that is news.*

This suggests news is reports of the unusual, but news is not always about unusual events; routine government decisions and company announcements might be news if they are of interest and relevant to many people.

The importance given to one piece of news over another in a newspaper depends on a variety of factors, such as proximity.

Another factor is relevance. A scientific breakthrough that could affect a country's farmers, or the health of many of the population, even if reported from another country, could knock a good local story off the front page.



## How to get news

A large proportion of daily news comes from events known about in advance, such as government news conferences, visits by foreign leaders, companies announcing annual results and court cases. These will be entered in a diary and every newsroom must have one.

However, some news arrives unexpectedly, without warning - train wrecks and plane crashes. Others are uncovered by making regular checks with the police, fire and ambulance services, essential for news of major crimes, accidents or civil disturbances. Journalists call these routine checks 'calls'.

Other places to find news:

- **Pressure groups** – in every country organisations lobby on causes such as the environment, animal welfare, human rights, etc. Some may have something new to say or plan a special campaign.
- **Specialist journals** – covering areas such as health, science, the environment or the oil industry. Written mainly for specialists, they often produce stories of interest to a wider public.

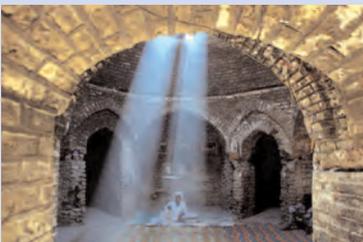
- **Research institutes/Think Tanks** – some study the state of society and the economy. Some try to forecast future trends. Others compare countries' policies. Any can provide interesting stories.

- **Anniversaries** – looking back at a major event in the past. Seeing how things have changed since.

- **Follow-ups** – looking back at a major story that happened weeks, months or years ago. What has happened to those involved?

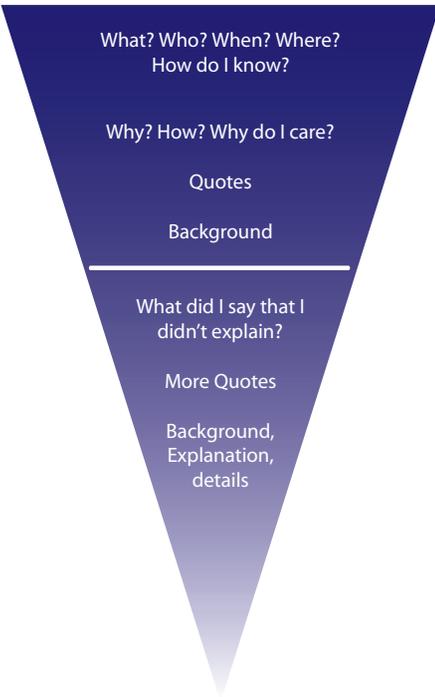
## Presenting news

However good the story, reporters must present it in a way that makes people want to absorb it. Most people today cope with an information overload from different sources – television, radio, the internet – and may be reading in a crowded train. To grab their attention news stories must be clear, concise, and interesting, dramatic and colourful.



## The inverted pyramid

This is a classic method to construct a news story. A good reporter can tell an essential story in four or five paragraphs, putting the key elements of the report at the top and adding others in descending order of importance. Such a story can be cut from the bottom, if editors need more space for other information.



The first paragraph, the **LEAD paragraph**, is crucial. It must answer these questions:

**WHAT** happened?

**WHO** was involved?

**WHEN** did it happen?

**WHERE** did it happen?

**HOW DO I KNOW?** The **SOURCE** for the story.

If you have not answered who, what, when, where, why and how in the first two paragraphs, you will be struggling to produce a readable story.

The lead contains only the crucial facts. Leave other details until lower in the story. Jettison names – unless they are famous – and long titles from the lead. Place the source in the lead because it immediately tells the reader your story is credible; sometimes it can drop to the second paragraph, but no later.

The second paragraph should answer the questions not covered in the lead – **why** and **how** did it happen?

And then ask yourself crucial questions:



## Why do I care? So what?

Establish the context of the story. Explain to the reader why this story is worth reading. It may appear interesting and worthy to you, but if nobody else is interested you are wasting your time.

After spelling out the story essentials, you need a quote to support your main lead point, lend authority and credibility to your story and demonstrate that what you wrote was based on evidence.

The following Reuters story illustrates how the main questions are answered, particularly sourcing, context in the second paragraph and a supporting quote in the third.

*Seoul (Reuters) – North Korea said on Friday it could return to six-party talks aimed at ending its nuclear programme if the conditions were right, South Korea’s Yonhap news agency reported, citing Pyongyang’s state media.*

*The statement comes a day after President Bush and Chinese President Hu Jintao expressed concern about the reclusive communist state and vowed support for the talks which have been stalled for nearly a year.*

*“We will come up for talks any time if the United States shows trustworthy attitudes and arranges right terms and conditions,” North Korean officials told a visiting Russian parliamentary delegation in Pyongyang, Yonhap reported.*

After the quote, provide a paragraph or two of essential background to explain why this story came about.

At this point, after just four paragraphs, the story could go into a newspaper or website, providing the essentials for the reader. However, the story can be developed with more details, quotes and background.



## Identifying the lead

Capturing the perfect lead is vital for a good news report, and it is worth spending time on it. Sometimes, in a complicated story, the lead is not immediately obvious so try these approaches to hit on the essential story and find the best way to tell it.

1. **The Bus Stop** – imagine you are at a bus-stop, trying to tell a story to a friend just as the bus pulls away. You must shout the key elements of the story to him before he is out of ear-shot.
2. **The Grandmother** – imagine you are telling the story to your grandmother over the telephone.
3. **The Friend** – answer a question from a friend: “So, what happened there?” “I’ll tell you.” .....
4. **The Headline** - write the headline first because it concentrates the mind on the key points.

**KING SHOT BY REBEL GENERAL  
- WITNESS**

5. **The Keyword** – identify one key word and build the lead from that:

**“RIOTS”**



## Different lead approaches

### Immediate identification leads

The person in the story is so important there is no need for any explanation.

*President Clinton said on Tuesday that he was planning to send more troops to Kosovo because of continuing violence in the territory.*

But make sure people can make that instant identification. If not, then –

*A senior U.S. official said the government was studying plans to send more troops to Kosovo .....*

*Assistant Under Secretary of State Dan Morgan...or...The official, who declined to be named, said...*

### Summary leads

Used when several things are happening, none of them outstanding, but which together represent a major change, or when the reporter has not had time to study the implications of all of them.

*e.g. The East Timorese government introduced 350 new measures to try to attract foreign investors, particularly in the oil and gas sector. Among the measures are...*

## Multiple element leads

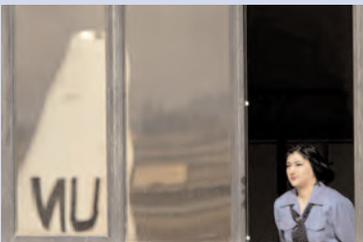
When two events come together, and one cannot be dropped for the other.

*e.g. The British government announced on Thursday it had fired Defence Minister Tom Jones and suspended all arms purchases following newspaper allegations of corruption involving the department.*

Alternatively, if this is too much for a lead paragraph, you could lead with the main element and bring in the rest as a second paragraph.

*e.g. The British government said on Thursday it had fired Defence Minister Tom Jones and suspended all arms purchases.*

*The move followed newspaper allegations of corruption involving the defence department.*



### Interpretative leads

Using sources to describe the consequences of an action.

*e.g. President Clinton announced on Thursday he planned to pull out 3,000 American troops from Kosovo, a move that U.N. officials said would prompt more ethnic Serbs to flee the province.*

Make sure the evidence arrives high in the story - the 3rd or 4th paragraph – preferably from a named source.

*e.g. Jan Suchinsky, head of the U.N.'s refugee agency UNCHR in Belgrade, told this reporter: "Serbs are already leaving the territory at the rate of 50 a week, because of the fear of reprisals from Kosovo Albanians. This move can only speed up the process."*

### Source in the lead

Normally the source comes at the end of the lead, the news.

*e.g. More than half a million refugees are living in Serbia as a result of the war in Bosnia, the U.N. said on Friday.*

But in some cases, particularly if there are doubts about the veracity of the information, or if it is contentious, the source should come first.

*e.g. A leading Manchuk dissident politician said more than 5,000 people had been murdered by right-wing death squads over the past six months.*



## Ways to improve leads

- Use the active voice, not passive; it is more direct and shorter.

*French troops led by Napoleon invaded Manchukistan on Thursday, the Pentagon said.*

Not:

*Manchukistan was invaded on Thursday by French troops led by Napoleon.*

- Don't start a news story with a question. It only works occasionally with features.
- Avoid abbreviations, titles, and long names of people and places unless they are well known.

*e.g. Europe's main security organisation rather than The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).*

*The U.N.'s refugee agency rather than The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).*

- Use a quote in a lead only if it is very dramatic.

*Yugoslavia's army commander warned that NATO would experience "hell on earth" if their troops tried to enter Kosovo province.*

- Try to use the present tense – *China plans* rather than *China was planning to...*

## Key points for writing stories

- **Accuracy** – If you can't get the basic facts right, nobody will believe anything else you have written.

**Never assume your readers have prior knowledge.** You should provide essential background and explanation every time you write a story, even if it has been running for some time. Imagine you are writing for a reader who has been abroad for months and has just returned to the country.

- **Be open-minded** – Never assume someone is in the right or in the wrong.
- **Clarity** – Don't get bogged down in details and figures. Use plain, straightforward language. British journalist and writer H.G. Wells once said: *"I write as straight as I can just as I walk as straight as I can, because that is the best way to get there."*
- **Comb it** – Go through the story at least twice, weeding out errors, unnecessary words, checking figures, grammar, everything - especially the names of people and places. **Never expect someone else to catch your mistakes.**



- **Quotes** – Always look out for good, colourful quotes. They bring a story to life and give it authority and credibility. Don't overuse them; numerous quotes are hard to digest. If the spoken word makes up most of the story, use reported speech and a few key direct quotes.
- **Link** the various points of your story in a logical sequence to help readers move naturally from one point to the next. Keep the story flowing.
- **Balance** – Make sure you do not suggest bias or inject your opinions. Ensure you offer the views of both sides in a dispute, and give anyone accused of wrongdoing a chance to respond. Avoid words like 'claimed' which suggest you doubt what is being said. Avoid 'fears' and 'hopes', as in 'it was feared that' because these might suggest you are taking sides. 'Admitted' suggests a person has done something wrong and 'emphasised' or 'pointed out' suggest you believe what the speaker says. In all such cases, use the neutral word 'said'.
- **Background** – Background is essential for all stories. Weave it into the writing in small dabs as the narrative flows rather than sticking a large chunk in the middle or end. Write down the key background points in a notebook next to you, and tick off each when you weave them into the story.
- **Colour** – Detail brings a story to life, makes a person more real or demonstrates to the reader that you are actually on the spot.



## Sources

As a general rule, the more sources you have for a story, the better. The bigger the story, the more essential it is to have hard, named sources.

Cultivating new sources is never time wasted. The English 18th century writer and journalist Samuel Johnson once said: *"Sir, I count it a day lost whenever I fail to make a new acquaintance."*

Most editors demand two independent sources before using any story. In certain cases one will do, provided it is absolutely trustworthy, and in a position to know. Stay away from unnamed sources and never use them to make allegations or contentious statements. Attacks and complaints from behind a cloak of anonymity are not acceptable.

Be fair to your sources, in your own interest as well as theirs.

- **Named sources** – always preferable. If the source refuses to be identified, negotiate how he or she can be identified. Strive to make the source as specific as possible – a 'Western diplomat involved in the negotiations' is better than 'a diplomatic source'.
- **Background** – when a source says it is giving information 'on background' it usually means you cannot use the material at all, unless you obtain it from another, independent source.
- **Official sources** – statements from the government, state organisations, the central bank and other official sources are usually carefully worded and often bland, but they should be milked for details because they are the safest sources, even if they do not give the whole picture.
- **Academics, experts** – these are often the best sources because they are usually independent so should provide unbiased information that goes further than official statements.
- **Foreign sources** – diplomats, non-government organisations, U.N. bodies, foreign firms. Often useful because they know a country well, but from an outsider's view.
- **Religious, cultural organisations, professional bodies** – these can add authority to specific stories. Places of worship have many members, spread widely across vast areas, so they know what is happening on the ground.
- **Street sources** – consumers and the men and women in the street are always worth using, provided you talk to enough people to gather a reasonable cross-section of opinion.



- **Other media** – It is sometimes unavoidable to quote information from another news organisation e.g. an exclusive interview on an important topic by a prominent figure. However, picking up stories from other papers should be done sparingly, only from reliable media, and should be attributed.

- **“Can I see your story?”** – Resist demands from sources to see your story before publication. If you must, make clear this is for accuracy - you will not change the meaning of quotes. And impose a deadline to prevent a source from sitting on news.

## Features

These can be completely timeless or might accompany a news story. One example: When covering a major earthquake, or similar natural disaster, a good reporter would do one main story covering all angles, then also a colourful feature. For instance, one villager digging with bare hands to recover his missing daughter, to highlight the human dimension of the tragedy.

General rules for writing a news story lead are fairly rigid, but for feature leads there are virtually no rules - as long as it works.

Here are some Reuters feature leads:

**LOS ANGELES** – *Victor pulled away, looked up, and his gaze met hers. Without a word, Connie seemed to know what he wanted. Perhaps it was what she wanted as well.*

(feature about new series of ethnic romance novels featuring Cuban Americans).

**BUENOS AIRES** – *Sigmund Freud might have had trouble imagining that, far from his native Austria, his name would be as readily recognisable as that of tango legend Carlos Gardel.*

(feature about the large number of psychoanalysts in Argentina).

**SOUTH AFRICA** – *a man heaves his sack of cabbages and sweet potatoes into a rickety shared taxi and travels nine hours under the scorching sun, to the market in Johannesburg. By the time he arrives, half his tiny harvest is rotten and the 48-year-old father of five returns to his impoverished village just a few pennies richer.*

(feature on poverty in South Africa).



Like any story a feature should have a strong opening to draw in readers and must lead them through it logically.

When writing a story with several apparently unconnected angles, such as a travel feature, consider listing all the points of interest on paper then look for points that clearly lead to others. Connect them with lines to show you how the narrative will link the ideas in a clear pattern.

Unlike a news story, which is designed to be cut from the bottom if required, a feature is constructed to be used as a whole, with a beginning, a middle and an end. The last paragraph, sometimes called a 'kicker', might return the reader to the opening lead.

Some journalists strive hard to achieve a really good final kicker, but don't strive too hard and end up making it look terribly forced.

One approach used in feature writing is to imagine a satellite camera in the sky. It looks first at an individual, describing his or her predicament. The lens then opens to view the individual's family, and how they are affected. Wider still, the camera scans their town, and finally captures the state of the whole country.

There are many other ways to lead a feature; here are a few:

- **Straight** – tell a feature story in a straightforward way, just like a news story, provided the subject is interesting enough.

*e.g. For Bulgarians fortunate enough to own a car, May 21 was a black day. They woke up to find the price of petrol had gone up by a staggering 92 per cent.*

- **Hard-hitting** – this grabs reader attention early by focussing on a dramatic point at the opening.

*e.g. The young fighter looked relaxed as he smoked a cigarette while cradling his automatic rifle in his arms. He was only 10, but had already killed more than a dozen government soldiers.*

**Or:**

GULU, Uganda - When the young Ugandan realised the woman he had raped in the dark of the refugee camp was his mother, he hung himself from a beam in their hut.



- **Delayed** – the story impact is saved for a few paragraphs. But don't delay for too long.

*e.g. It was a perfect setting for Dracula's castle, looming at the end of a mist-shrouded valley deep in the mountains of Transylvania, in Romania.*

*A dog, or perhaps it was a wolf, howled in the distance as the visitors pushed open the creaking door and were met by an elderly woman dressed in black.*

*She proudly showed us where Vlad Dracul, the blood-thirsty 15th century leader who inspired the Dracula legend, had worked, eaten and slept.*

*The only trouble was, that according to the Romanian State Tourist office, he never once came here.*

Don't bury the 'peg' too deeply or your readers may give up. Get to the point by the fourth paragraph at the latest.

- **Historical** – This uses an incident in the past to start the story.

*e.g. thirty years ago, Manchukistan celebrated the end of a bloody civil war that killed over 100,000 people and virtually destroyed the country's economic base.....*

- **Narrative** – this tells a story in a chronological way, from the beginning. It can draw the reader in – but the narrative must quickly reach a point which will hold his attention.

*e.g. On a cold winter morning last April, three men met in the centre of London, took separate taxis and headed for a small airfield near the coast.*

*Each taking separate routes, they arrived at intervals and boarded an ageing Soviet-built cargo plane for a four-hour flight south, landing in a remote former military air base in Bosnia....*

- **Humorous** – humour is not easy to achieve, but it can work if used sparingly in a lead.

*e.g. TIRANA - a few years ago, Albania's community authorities promised women they could retire 5 years early if they had six children. Have 12, they said, and we will give you a cow.*

- **Anecdotal** – particularly useful when writing features about personalities. Set the scene by introducing something from their past.

*e.g. John Smith began his career wiping the floors of the city's biggest department store. Ten years later, he bought the shop.*

- **Descriptive** – paint a scene, then drive into the story.

*e.g. The pilot, wearing mauve jeans, orange T-shirt, baseball cap and sandals, ambled across the scorching tarmac and drawled: "OK, you guys, let's get this show on the road."*

*The "show" was a 32-year-old DC-3 airliner, and moments later one of the world's less-publicised scheduled airliners was heading for its island destination.*



## Analysis

An opportunity to look deeply from different angles at a news theme or issue of interest to readers which may not be in the news. The lead may be more general than in a news story but the discipline required is the same: good sourcing, balance, background and quotes. Unlike the news story, the sourcing does not need to be in the first two paragraphs, but the story must make clear quite early where the information is coming from.

One way to approach a complex analysis is to gather all the significant points, background and quotes into groups numbered 1, 2, 3, etc. according to the arguments or points of view they support. This makes it easier to set out cases logically and to contrast conflicting points and views.

Here are some Reuters analysis pieces:

**MOSCOW** – *In his most explicit gesture to repair the shattered trust of Russia's new rich, President Vladimir Putin has vowed to help them bring home billions of dollars they illegally spirited abroad in the 1990s.*

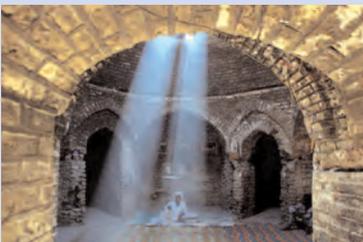
*But will thousands of well-off Russians – who according to some estimates have more than USD250 billion in offshore accounts and overseas assets – rise to Putin's bait?*

**LONDON** – *A vastly reduced majority could frustrate the efforts of re-elected British Prime Minister Tony Blair to push his agenda through parliament and serve out a full third term in office.*

*As the dust settled on Saturday on Blair's third straight election victory, a first for his centre-left Labour Party, attention swung to the effect on Labour policy of having a majority of just 66 seats, down from 161 last time*

**ZANZIBAR** – *Political tensions are rising sharply on Zanzibar ahead of elections likely to test to the limit Tanzania's carefully groomed image of stability.*

*The opposition on the semi-autonomous islands vows it will not be cheated a third time after being robbed of power by fraud and bloody repression at 1995 and 2000 polls.*



## Investigative Reporting

Some argue all reporting is investigative, because good reporters always seek after the truth or the best version of it available. However, investigative reports do have certain characteristics . They:

- Require large investments in time and people.
- Usually look at a trend or pattern of activity rather than a single event.
- Often look into an issue not previously covered by the media.
- Depend on original sources, perhaps statistics buried in company or government documents.
- Often concentrate on crime, corruption or an abuse of power.
- Sometimes involve working under cover. (Leave this to experts. It calls for ethical decisions and can trigger severe consequences if a reporter is discovered, particularly if involving investigations into organised crime.) In some countries using hidden recording equipment is illegal.

Initial research should uncover as much publicly available information as is possible. Know your country's freedom of information laws and use them to search government and company reports, official publications, lists and other records in public libraries. The Internet is a rich source for digging out details, but don't assume the information you find is absolutely accurate.

Armed with this information, persuade the people involved in the story to fill in the details, on or off the record.

If your story accuses individuals of wrongdoing you must contact them for their response, even if it's 'no comment', and you must include the response in the story.



## Interviewing

- **Preparation** – gather as much background as you can on the person and the organisation. Otherwise you will waste time asking obvious questions. You will also demonstrate to the interviewee that you have ‘done your homework’. It will make the interviewee more confident in your abilities and likely to offer more information.
- **Advance questions** – if someone you want to interview insists on seeing questions in advance, comply if you must but when it comes to the interview don't feel those are the only questions you can ask.
- **Greetings** – spend the first couple of minutes chatting about generalities. If you have done your homework you will have found out something about the interviewee's interests. It all helps to create a relaxed mood.  
*Check names and titles.*
- **Eye contact, body language** – don't pull your chair right up to the other side of his desk and thrust yourself towards him. He might find it intimidating. Push your chair back a little, move it to an angle, and sit back. Make regular eye contact.

- **Tape-recorders, note-books** – ask if you can use a tape-recorder. If you do, don't put it right in front of the interviewee, a constant, whirring reminder that all his words are being recorded. Put it to one side. Try not to pull out a note-book immediately, then place it discreetly on your knee rather than the desk.
- **Keep questions short** – you are trying to extract information from your subject, not show off how clever you are.
- **Don't ask difficult questions first** – you risk offending the interviewee, and cutting short the interview. Keep the tough questions until later to ensure that you have at least some useable interview material.
- **“Some of your critics suggest”** – one possible way of putting a difficult question. Imply that you don't share the view.
- **Ask open, not closed questions** – closed questions usually start with a verb – “have you”, “can you”, “are you”, and can usually be answered by one word – “yes” or “no”. Try and create open questions – “how do you feel about?” “what are you hearing”, “why is this important”, “how would you describe”.

There is always room for a closed question when you are trying to pin the subject down to a “yes” or “no” on a key point.



- **Avoid multiple questions** – the subject will simply answer the easiest one.
- **Use the silences** – don't automatically jump in with a comment if the subject falls silent after a question. The interviewee could well be pondering what to say, or weighing up whether to give you a crucial piece of information. Give him time.
- **If you don't understand** – if you are struggling to understand what he is saying, use phrases like "if I understand you correctly", or "how would you explain this to the man in the street".
- **Is there anything else you should have asked? Use this 'sweeper' question at the end of every interview.**  
Sometimes interviewees have information available on issues you were not aware of.
- **Check the names** – participants at press conferences are usually identified by name boards. Draw a map in your notebook to show where each sits and number them 1, 2 and 3. Now you can identify quickly who is speaking against each quote.
- **Work as a pack** – it is usually difficult to follow up a question, so follow up on those of other reporters. A room full of reporters working well together usually comes away with more information than a small group asking for exclusive questions.
- **Door-step** – approach panel members when they leave the room, or before. Many are happy to answer follow-up queries.
- **Look for the specialist reporter** – if you have to cover a complicated, unfamiliar topic, look for the specialist reporter - the one asking informed questions - and talk to him or her afterwards. Experts are usually happy to share their knowledge.

## News Conferences

- **Sit at the front** – and resist efforts by the moderator to have questions asked in bunches - a smart conferencee will answer the easy ones and skip the hard ones.
- **Check the background** – if you know the subject to be covered, gather as much background on it as you can. Contacts may be able to tell you topics that are likely to be raised, and any rumours.



## Working with numbers

Reporters in all fields of journalism have to deal with numbers, because financial and business stories are often the big news event of the day. Some reporters freeze when confronted by numbers, and there is a widely-held belief that **reporter + numbers = error**.

To dig the best stories out of numbers, follow some basic rules:

- **Compare and contrast** – numbers on their own tell us very little. Only when they are compared with others – last year, last month, another company – do they make any sense.
- **Numbers tell stories** – look beyond the numbers at possible reasons for change. Monthly figures show that Manchukistan's wheat imports have doubled in a year. Why? Because the government introduced bread subsidies to avoid civil unrest.
- **Use fractions and percentages rather than figures** – half a million is better than 500,000. Use exact numbers sparingly, and not in the lead.
- **Look for the human angle** – people like to read about people. How does a rise in interest rates effect ordinary house-buyers? Will people lose their jobs?

## Ethics

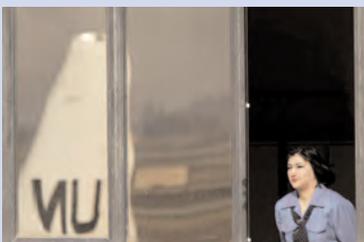
Journalist organisations in each country have their own code of conduct, with some details varying according to local conditions and customs. However most codes agree on the key points.

- **Never fabricate or plagiarise.**
- **Never take a bribe** – many journalists in developing countries are poorly paid, so susceptible to bribes from politicians and companies to write favourable stories, or to suppress negative ones.

*Always resist demands from interviewees for the right to approve your story for publication.*

- **Be wary of receiving hospitality** – there is no such thing as a free lunch. People and organisations offering hospitality normally expect something in return.
- **Never reveal your sources** – reporters in a number of countries have gone to jail rather than reveal sources demanded by courts.

**Keep your political views out of your reporting**



## Safety

Your safety is paramount, and no story, however good, is worth the risk of death or serious injury.

If you are caught in street violence your usefulness as a reporter is severely limited.

If you are likely to be involved in such potential danger tell your editors what you propose doing and explain the risks. If you are covering demonstrations that could turn violent, check out the location in advance and plan your escape routes.

Most reporters will not be required to cover a war. Many media organisations now require reporters covering conflicts to take a course about coping with hostile environments, usually run by former soldiers. If you are involved in covering armed conflicts, there are a few basic rules to follow.

*Weigh up the risk and decide if the story is worth it.*

*Learn first aid, especially how to stop bleeding.*

*Never carry a weapon or travel with a journalist carrying a weapon.*

*Always identify yourself clearly if challenged. Never describe yourself as anything other than a reporter.*

*Always wear civilian clothes unless accredited as an official war correspondent and required to wear special dress. Never wear military or paramilitary clothing.*

*Be acutely aware of signs that you are moving into a changing situation, possibly another faction's sphere of influence.*

*If working on both sides of the front line, never give information to one side about military operations on the other.*

*Don't carry maps with markings that could suggest you might be spying.*

*If caught in a situation where people are threatening, try to stay relaxed and act in a friendly manner. Carry cigarettes or other small luxuries you can hand out to people.*

*Wear a bracelet or tag indicating your blood group in case you are wounded.*

*Wear shoes that you can run in when covering potentially dangerous situations.*

*Where are the locals, why have things gone quiet.*

*Be frightened, it's normal, but don't panic.*

*Insurance – If working in a danger zone, check that your employer has you adequately insured.*



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Published by Reuters Limited, The Reuters Building, South Colonnade, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5EP.

16296-01-06