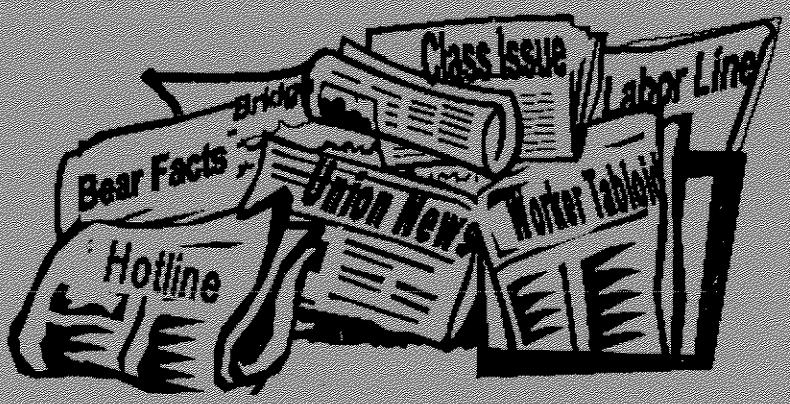
Writing for the Union Newsletter



A guide for union newsletter editors

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Part 1 – Selecting and Writing News Stories

1. What types of news stories should go into the union newsletter?

This answer may depend on the editorial policy or mission of your newsletter. For example, the Iowa State Press Association has the following mission statement:

The mission of the Labor Press[1]

- to inform members of events in their local union, their community, and their larger political environment
- to present an alternative source of information tailored to the needs and interests of working people
- to build the solidarity of the local union
- to educate and mobilize members around labor's political issues and agendas

What direction does this mission statement provide regarding newsletter content?

Great ideas for news stories:

Politics

- Local, county, state, national.....
- Candidate profiles, voting records, your own interviews with candidates
- Political issues, especially those that most affect your members
- Political processes: how to register to vote, how to participate in your local precinct caucus and county party; how to write resolutions; how to get involved in campaign work
- Party platforms: compare and contrast

Union Solidarity

- What's happening to unions in other industries, other states, other plants in our town
- Solidarity across borders
- Solidarity in the workplace: across shifts, across teams, across departments

Stories and pictures of union members at work

- Take the union into the workplace!
- Build a sense of closeness between what goes on at work and the local union

1 Iowa State Labor Press Association.

Internal union policy debates and events

- Issues, elections, meetings
- "You are the Union"

Contract bargaining

- Membership mobilization around issues
- Discussion of proposals
- Ratification debate

How the economy works for workers

- CEO salaries compared to workers' wages
- Globalization of the labor and capital markets
- Technological change as it affects your members

Workplace problems and issues

- Fighting discrimination and harassment
- Union proposals to management to correct problems
- Health and safety hazards in the workplace
- How the union is fighting to represent its members within labor-management cooperation programs

2. What makes an issue newsworthy?

There is a list of factors, detailed below, that many newspaper editors consider when deciding if a story is newsworthy. Normally, a story should perform well in at least two areas.

Timing
The word news means exactly that - things which are new. Topics that are current are more likely to be good news. Members are used to receiving the latest updates, and are exposed to so much news about that old news is quickly discarded.

Significance
The number of people or importance of the person affected by the story is a factor to consider. Contract negotiations can affect hundreds of members, while a disciplinary grievance may only affect one person. Give significant news stories priority in your newsletter.

Proximity
Stories that happen near to us have more significance. The closer the story to home, the more newsworthy it is. But even stories that lack proximity can be made more proximate. For example a story about the war in Iraq can be made

very newsworthy if it features a local union member called up for duty and the affect on his or her family.

Human Interest
Human interest stories are a bit of a special case. They often disregard the main rules of newsworthiness; for example, they don't date as quickly, they need not affect a large number of people, and it may not matter where in the world the story takes place.

Human interest stories appeal to emotion. They aim to evoke responses such as amusement or sadness. Television news programs often place a humorous or quirky story at the end of the show to finish on a feel-good note. Newspapers often have a dedicated area for offbeat or interesting items. Human interest stories can add interest to your newsletter.

3. Does your newsletter connect with members?

We all know union members (and potential members) who are represented by a union, but are not really connected to their union. That disconnect may stem in part from how *we* communicate --or fail to communicate--with *them*. They are unclear about what their union stands for, what their union is trying to achieve and the relationship between their union and what they confront on the job every day. Unfortunately, too many people see the union as a service that they may or may not choose to buy. Too often, they don't see the union as a cause to support, a movement that is relevant to the realities they face on the job every day.

Writing news stories that show the union as an agent for change can help unions connect with their members. Members and potential members want to know what the union's agenda is, how the agenda is being carried out and how they fit into that agenda. Does your newsletter tell this story? Or, does it merely chronicle the workaday activities of the union without conveying a coherent impression of what the union's cause is all about?

Below are concepts to consider before writing any news story for your newsletter:

1. **Tell the story of an active union with "issues advocacy" as its central focus.**
2. **Let members speak about issues important to them.**
3. **Speak to a diverse membership.**
4. **Balance content that presents the union as a service with content that presents it as a cause.**
5. **Incorporate as many "calls to action" as you can.**
6. **Use photographs as "mirrors" instead of "projectors" – *show different people from diverse backgrounds, rather than the usual clique.***
7. **Consider communicating more often in more manageable bites.**

4. Rewriting someone else's news story

Rewrites. Most of us couldn't be union newsletter editors if we didn't borrow and use material from each other, from our national and international union press, and from the state and national AFL-CIO. Most of these sources want us to use their articles and encourage us to do so. The challenge for us is to get our members to read articles written for a different audience and on issues that may seem to be distant from the local scene.

The answer is: "rewriting." Rewriting is more than editing. We use this term to mean taking a canned article (for which you have copying permission) and making it exciting, relevant and readable for YOUR members.

Some basic principles:

1. Local focus. Give the article a local focus or slant. Write up a paragraph which points out how this issue is relevant to your members. This may take a bit of research on your part, but many times, you know the local connection because you are active in your local community.

2. Interview your members. A great way to do this is to interview someone from your local who can comment on the issue and how it affects them, their family or department at work. Then you get the double advantage of being able to have a local person's name in the article.

3. Change the headline. Look at the headline. Can it be "jazzed up"? Given a local twist?

Example: Main headline of original article: **"Unemployment worsens in fourth quarter".** Your "jazzed up" substitute title: **"Jobs harder to find in (your city)".** Your subtitle with a local twist: **"Your City impact: we are the most vulnerable workers!"**

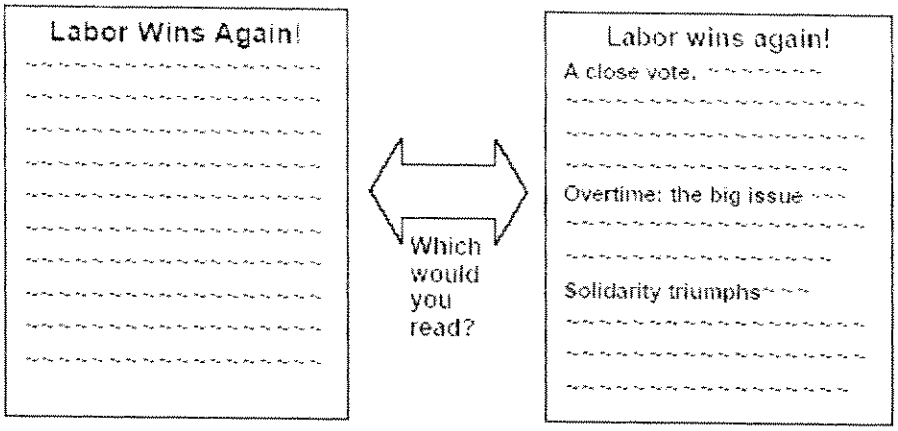
4. Change the Length. See if the canned article can be shortened. If so, don't hesitate to cut, but be sure to keep in the main points.

5. Pull quotes. Pick a sentence from the article which is especially "quotable" and put it in a box somewhere in the article. Readers will nearly always read the pull quote first. It serves as a half-open door which arouses readers' curiosity and invites them into the article as a whole.

6. Placement. You may have (or create) a special section for political articles. Many newsletters like to have the important political articles as lead articles. Think of having them on a right-hand facing page for special emphasis.

7. Graphics. Can you find a graphic or cartoon which ties into the article? You might even consider adding a comment under the graphic: "More? See below!"

8. Internal headlines. Break up an article by putting the first sentence in bold—or create your own internal headline for the paragraph and make it bold. Readers are much more likely to stick with an article which looks like a series of short pieces.



→ *Borrowing articles: Legal Restrictions*[2]

The Federal law protects authors from unauthorized use of their publications. Copyright owners have the exclusive right to reproduce and distribute copies of their work.

In order to legally reprint an article, cartoon, chart, etc., from a book, magazine, or newspaper, you must call, or preferably write and obtain permission to do so. You need to tell them what material you wish to copy and how it will be used.

Frequently such permission is readily granted for non-profit purposes, but certain guidelines may accompany that permission. For example, the Des Moines Register requires that only entire articles may be reprinted, and no "high-lighting" of any type may be added. Check with the daily paper in your area. Think twice before "borrowing" from it. If they're hostile to your goals and keep their eye on your activities, they're sure to holler when you reprint without permission.

"Always credit original sources and reproduce all copyright lines."

In some instances you may be able to obtain "blanket permission" to copy articles on an on-going basis from a given publication without having to ask each time. Again, you must designate the original source in your reprint.

It is also possible, and often more effective, to use the ideas and facts presented in an article or chart if you put the information into your own words. Permission is not needed to do this. A direct quotation may also be inserted if it is not longer than two or three paragraphs taken from a long article and credit is given to the source.

Some publications are not copyrighted and may be copied without permission. These would include many newsletters put out by organizations such as the AFL-CIO. It may

2 This article was borrowed and modified with permission from Nancy Brigham, *How to do Leaflets, Newsletters and Newspapers*, 1991.

be wise to check this before using the material. If you do use borrowed materials, be sure to give credit to the original publication.

An article which is copied for your personal use is considered legal -- a "fair use." Likewise, if you wish to copy something to hand out in a non-profit workshop where you are serving as "teacher," three requirements must be met: **1]** it should be brief (not over 2,500 words), and must include a notice of copyright; **2]** permission should be secured unless there is not enough time to do so; and, **3]** there should be only one copy per person and the material may not be used over and over in subsequent workshops.

Reprinting photos and articles

No editor depends 100% on original articles and graphics. You'll occasionally reprint interesting articles and cartoons from other papers and magazine. As for whether you need permission, the rules are a bit muddy. Such reprints are policed by the Copyright Act.

The political context

Since U.S. law is vague about "fair use," whether you're safe reprinting something may also depend on your political context. If you borrow a cartoon from a national magazine for a non-profit newsletter handed to a group of neighbors, chances are the big-timers won't know about it and won't care.

The bigger your circulation, the more careful you should be. Many copyright owners worry only about commercial reprints. So if your paper's a money maker, watch out. And don't sneak copyright cartoons into ads.

5. Preparing to write your own news story.

This basic crux of all news is that you need to answer five questions:

Who? What? Where? When? Why?

Any good news story provides answers to each of these questions, so being able to answer these questions is essential. Basic research and investigation techniques can ensure that these questions are answered honestly and accurately. The answers to these questions also become the building blocks of the story's lead (*discussed later*).

Interviews

One of the most basic investigative techniques is the interview. As editor, you also become aware that talking to people at work, at the union meeting, at political and social events is always a way to liven up your newsletter. People are always interested in what other people have to say, and most people love to see their name in print – provided their words are reported accurately!

During an interview, the editor should follow these general procedures:

- **Ask the five w's.** First hand witnesses or participants are always the best, most direct source of information for a news story. Has a member gone to convention? Participated on a picket line? Worked phone banks in a recent get out the vote effort? Ask them about their experiences or even to tell their story directly in 2 or 3 paragraphs.
- **Treat the other person with courtesy and respect** and remain calm and professional. After opening the discussion with brief casual conversation, the editor should introduce the subject of the interview in a natural manner.
- **Allow the person to describe the event without interruption.** Then, the editor should review the story with the individual, checking it for accuracy and completeness. Before taking out a notebook, however, the editor should explain the necessity of keeping a written record so that the interviewee will not become tense or cease talking.
- **Use a new sheet of the notebook** for each person interviewed.
- **Record all key statements in the exact words** the person uses, and decide later what facts are irrelevant and can be omitted from the report.
- **Ask one question at a time** and make all necessary notes on the answer before moving on to the next question. Questions should be phrased to encourage the individual to respond with details rather than "yes" or "no" answers.
- **Do not erase any information** obtained in an interview, even if the interviewee gives conflicting details. If the person makes a contradictory statement, draw a line through the original statement, leaving it readable, and write in the change.
- **OK to fiddle with quotes.** If you need to change a quote--to make it more on target, to correct errors, etc. always be sure and check with the person you are quoting. Nothing makes you more irritated than to be misquoted. But you are also happy to have an alert editor catch an error and give you a chance to correct it before it appears in print.
- **One-liners and quotable quotes.** Always be alert for quotable one-liners, whether you are chatting with people in the workplace or listening to a speech or sermon.

Note taking:
In ferreting out the facts, newsletter editors invariably find themselves taking notes and talking with members, witnesses, or public officials. The following are tips from news reporters about the proper ways to take accurate notes when conducting fact-finding interviews.

- Record all the details about the incident under review in a notebook, which can be an invaluable aid in preparing any subsequent articles. The notebook eliminates the need for memorizing details "on the scene" and serves as a helpful reference at later stages of the investigatory process.
- When listing facts and details in a notebook, editors should use words and phrases instead of complete sentences, except when taking down quotes (which should be taken down exactly).
- Use a ball-point pen, rather than a pencil, to prevent smearing and fading
- Write legibly, making certain that names, titles, and departments are spelled correctly
- Make sure that all abbreviations are ones that can be readily understood by others
- Record details about separate items or from separate parties under separate headings, and print out names in capital letters
- Keep all notes about a specific issue together and separate from other case notes
- The main requirements for a notebook are accuracy, completeness, conciseness, and clarity - all of which depend on a thorough, accurate and objective investigation.

Remember – accuracy is a must!

Union members will read a union newsletter that is both interesting and trustworthy. Inaccuracies, misquotes or misleading information can destroy the trust between a union and its members. For many, the union newsletter is the voice of the union – so take care to project an honest and accurate message.

6. Drafting a lead

The lead – the opening sentence (or perhaps two) of a news story – is the most important part of a news story. The lead gives the reader a clear idea of what the article is about and helps the reader decide whether to read more or stop. An interesting lead hooks the reader, while a boring or confusing lead will push them away. Leads often summarize the essential elements of the story, like a preview of what's to come.

The lead answers the five *w's* of who, what, where, when and why, or at least several of these key questions. Many writers use the following basic formula for writing leads:

Who (noun) + ***What*** (what happened – usually a verb) + ***When*** (modifies the verb) + ***Where*** (a prepositional phrase) + ***Why*** (optional – may come up in a subordinate section of the sentence)

Lead Examples:

One sentence lead: *Fifteen new hires (who) joined Local 1 (what) this month (when) in the newly organized service department (where) sending management the message that "Local 1 is strong and getting stronger" (why).*

Lead paragraph: *Iowa Senator Tom Harkin (who) told 200 Postal Workers that he will lead the fight to pass the Employee Free Choice Act in Congress. Harkin made this promise at the Iowa AWPU Convention in Des Moines (where) on August 1st (when).*

Checklist for writing leads: If you answer "No" to any of the following questions, you should rewrite your lead.

1. Is it specific (rather than vague or abstract)?
2. Is it concise? (No more than 3 lines typed)
3. Does it begin with the news? (If you began with the time and place it occurred, rewrite it!)
4. Does it emphasize the most interesting and important aspect of the story--the main thing that happened?
5. If it originated in a distant city, did you begin with a dateline?
6. Have you used a relatively simple sentence structure, avoiding a long beginning clause or phrase?
7. Has it been localized?
8. If you used a question, is it short, simple and provocative?
9. If you used a quotation, does it adequately summarize the story?
10. Does your lead state or suggest the story's importance and its impact on your readers?
11. Have you double-checked all facts in your lead to be sure they are correct, and not exaggerated or inaccurate?

Things to avoid with leads:

- Don't lead with a prepositional phrase.
- Don't start a lead with a person's name – unless they are well known.
- Don't start with the *when* or *where elements*.

- Don't start with an official source's name – "According to the Department of Labor unemployment rose to four percent…" Instead say, *"Unemployment rose to four percent this month according to the Department of Labor."*
- ***Don't bury the lead*** – that is putting the most important information deep in the article.

Exercise: Rewrite the following leads:

1. On August 5-6, 2007, Martina Smith attended the Labor Press Conference in Reno, Nevada. At the event, Smith learned how to write interesting news stories and more effective leads. Smith, who recently agreed to serve as the Local 1 newsletter editor, plans to incorporate these lessons into the Local 1 newsletter.

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2. According to Post Master, Fred Kruger, the downtown branch will add 25 new postal worker jobs in September.

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3. The arbitrator in the Johnson termination grievance issued her decision on August 2nd. In the decision, the arbitration ruled that "the employer failed to prove that it had just cause to terminate Mike Johnson." The arbitrator ordered the employer to immediately reinstate Johnson with back pay and benefits.

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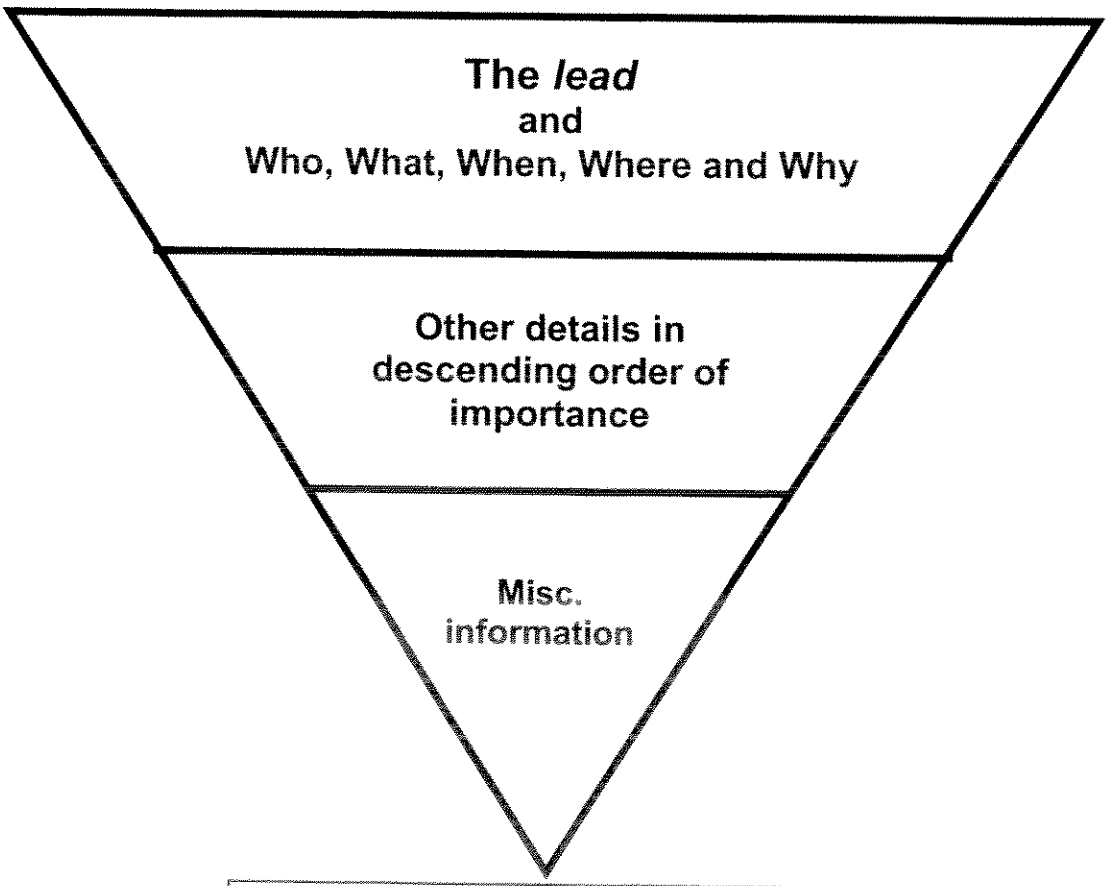
7. Arranging the news story using the inverted pyramid method

When arranging a news story it's helpful to think of an inverted pyramid. The idea is to place the most important information at the top of the pyramid and less important information towards the bottom.

The article should begin with the information most likely to intrigue or fascinate the reader. These first few sentences answer the basic questions of who, what, when, where and why. After reading these first sentences, the passing reader can move on to other articles and still have gotten the essence of the information.

The body of the story follows and provides the real detail of the article. Here the writer gives the reader with a strong interest all the facts of the story. The writer brings up new details to the reader in descending order of importance. Sometimes it's helpful to divide the body of the article into topical sections that appear in the story in the order of their importance.

The ending addresses only the most dedicated readers and contains the least important information. Never end a news story with a conclusion – like the ending of a novel. When the story contains all the pertinent information, just stop writing. Sometimes you can end a news story with an unusual or intriguing fact - that may not be important or central to the story, but adds final interest to the story.



The inverted pyramid for writing news stories

Exercise: Arrange the following sentences (by paragraph number) into a news story utilizing the inverted pyramid approach:

3 1. The incident allegedly occurred when a bus, which had just left Drummond's coal mine carrying some 50 workers, was stopped by gunmen, who forced two union leaders off.

4 2. They shot one on the spot, pumping four bullets into his head and dragged the other one off to be tortured and killed.

2 3. Now, in a civil trial set to begin today before a federal jury in Birmingham, Ala., union lawyers have presented affidavits from two people who allege that the Drummond Co. ordered the murder of two union leaders who worked at its coal mine in Colombia, a charge Drummond denies.

7 4. The suit is filed under a law that allows foreigners to sue U.S. companies here.

6 5. The United Steelworkers (USW), representing 1.2 million workers in the United States, and Unite, representing 2 million workers in the United Kingdom, took on the cause of Colombian unionists as one of their first joint actions following the unions' agreement in April to form a merger exploratory committee.

5 6. As the Associated Press reports: Multinationals operating in Colombia have admitted paying right-wing militias known as paramilitaries to protect their operations.

8 7. But human rights activists claim the companies went further, using the fighters to violently keep their labor costs down. The Drummond case, they say, is their best chance yet of seeing those allegations heard in court.

1 8. Colombia is the deadliest place for unionists—some 2,300 union leaders have been killed there since 1991 and only 37 people have been convicted in the murders.

Exercise: Interview an active union member and write a short news story about any of the following topics (using the inverted pyramid method):

- a grievance they filed
- a bargaining experience
- a political event in which they participated
- a union organizing effort

8. Drafting a headline

Headlines are your best chance at getting readers to read the important information or feature material in the body of the article. So they must grab the reader's interest, attention, curiosity—and do it in no more that 3 to 10 words! When you finish an article – or get one from a contributor – read it over with a special eye to writing the headline. What is especially important or exciting about the article? What is the ONE THING that this article is mainly about?

Headline basics:

Keep it short — just a few words--3 to 10--say the experts. The headline should probably not be a complete sentence. "Comments from AFL-CIO President John Sweeney on why he believes workers deserve higher wages and cost of living adjustments" is too long, too boring, and makes the reader feel she has the message just by reading the headline. "AFL-CIO President: *Employer wage proposal insulting*." Then your lead sentence can identify President Sweeney for those who don't know him.

Make it punchy —hard-hitting and direct. Don't meander around the topic. Get it out and done with.

Use the KISS approach—keep it simple and short! Short words, simple construction—a phrase, a quick question. No convoluted thoughts and meanings.

Target the "one thing" — make sure the central, most important message in the article comes across loud and clear. "The election process" doesn't tell you much or get you at all excited about reading the article. "Our election process needs help: Yours!" involves the reader, suggests that it is our union election process we are talking about, and conveys the urgency of the writer's perceived argument for changing the system. **Avoid cute headlines which provoke the reader's interest, but do not indicate what the story is about.**

Sub-headings are okay. Sometimes you can grab attention in the headline and then explain the "one thing" in a subhead. The headline grabs you; the subhead explains. The headline is bigger and bolder; the subhead smaller. Not: "Management approach to automation: Slash and Burn" But "Slash and Burn: Management's approach to automation"

Use the present tense —even if what you're talking about has already happened. "Union wins big" rather than "The union had a big victory".

Be active—talk about events in action, not as static finished products. "Contractor's Association creates violence study group" not "Commission to study workplace violence."

Be big and bold—set the headlines in larger font size and use bold type set.

Use lower case, only the first word and proper nouns are capitalized--- Not "CONTRACTOR'S ASSOCIATION CREATES VIOLENCE STUDY GROUP" or "Contractor's Association Creates Violence Study Group" but "Contractor's Association creates violence study group".

Watch out for double meanings---if you don't want to end up on Jay Leno's favorite headlines sketch, make sure to avoid double meanings. For example, "New Post Master proposes to cut downtown postal workers in half."

Headlines

First draft

Grievance report

Second draft *(always use a verb in your lead)*

Local wins arbitration case!

First draft

Management issues new absentee policy

Second draft *(entice the reader and show the union as change agent)*

Local protests management's new absentee policy

First draft

Teonta Williams, Local 1 COPE committee chair, reports that Local 1 raised a record $1,500 at the union picnic for the national union's Congressional Campaign Fund.

Second draft *(avoid long winded headlines)*

Local 1 members smash old record: raising $1,500 to help elect a pro-union Congress.

Exercise: Rewrite the following headlines:

1. *Local 1's voter registration drive started on August 1st.*

2. *Local President retires after 30 years at union meeting.*

3. *Teachers' strike idle students.*

4. *Press Association President says that nobody works as hard as union newsletter editors and thanks them for their service to the labor movement.*

Part 2 – Writing a Feature Story.

What's a feature story?
A feature goes much deeper into an issue than does a traditional news story. Features often contain analysis of an issue rather than just the facts. Features can run up to 10,000 words in length in some news papers. But even if a feature is only one tenth as long, it's important to have a clear idea of what you are going to write about – and what specific angle you will explore – as you get started.

Story mapping: a tool for preparing to write a feature story.
Story mapping can keep you from wasting a lot of time doing research that you won't be able to use. Here's an example of how to focus a feature by using the technique of story mapping.

Suppose you want to write about *the prevalence of cumulative trauma injuries* (like carpal tunnel syndrome) in your field. This provides a general story idea, but what exactly are you going to write about?

For every general story idea, there are many angles, or ways the story can be handled. For instance, a story about carpal tunnel syndrome could address: the causes of the condition, impact on worker lives, lack of an ergonomics standard addressing the issue, how the union safety committee is addressing the issue, or new treatment options for workers....the list goes on and on. If you try to cover everything, you will have zero focus. Without a clear angle, the likely result after lots of hard work will be one big mess!

Narrow your idea down to a few main sub-topics. Choose sub-topics that relate logically, and you will find it easier to focus your story. For example, to write a feature on carpal tunnel syndrome, you might choose to focus on the prevalence of the problem where you work, how union members have been affected by the problem and how the union is advocating for new safety protections that will address the problem.

Your next step is to **brainstorm as many angles as you can within each sub-topic.** What possible details are there to touch upon?

- → Break down *prevalence of carpal tunnel at your workplace*: OSHA 300 data and first report of injury reports, how many workers and in which work areas, lost time days, and medical claims.
- → Break down *how union members affected by the problem*: time off work, lost wages, pain and suffering, job restrictions and transfers, and stories from affected workers.
- → Break down *how the union safety committee is advocating for new safety protections*: what's the local union safety committee doing, grievances or OSHA complaints filed, educating members on safety rights and protections, national union efforts seeking ergonomics standard and etc.

Based on the angles you come up with, decide what the main angle for your story is. The carpal tunnel syndrome story's main focus could be to explain the issue through the eyes of a union steward who filed an OSHA complaint against the employer for failing to provide a safe workplace free from known safety hazards.

Suddenly, you have an interesting story about a dedicated union activist's struggle to make the workplace safer. It's straightforward, and will be relatively easy to write because you know where you want to go, and what types of information you'll need to take you there.

What's next?
Go out and get the information. You will need to do some research on the net or in a library, talk to people on the phone and set up your key face-to-face interviews. Set up an interview with the union steward you plan to feature. Talk with workers you know that have suffered carpal tunnel syndrome. Meet with the union safety committee to ask questions and collect information from OSHA 300 logs, incident reports and other documents.

The entire time you are doing your research, REMEMBER TO KEEP YOUR FOCUS. Keep asking yourself what information you really need. When you get extra information (which you most certainly will), don't get bogged down and distracted by it. If you stay true to your focus, you will spend your time and energy doing research efficiently.

It's Time to Write!
Features are the most interesting news stories to write. You are free to use colorful language and have more freedom to express yourself. Whereas hard news stories concentrate on the facts – just the facts – news features blast past those limitations. This is where you get to show off and be creative as a writer. Test your limits; push your use of language and your ability to set a scene.

There's no one right way to write, and there's no single best way for you to tell your story, so trust yourself...and try to come up with an original and effective approach. The more work you put into story development and research, the more you can go with the flow of your notes when you actually sit down and write the feature.

Try to make your reader feel like they are there. *Your writing can trigger all five senses!* You can think of a feature story as a series of mental images, presented one after the other.

Consider the story about the union steward who's filed an OSHA complaint stemming from the carpal tunnel syndrome problem. A great feature will put the reader INSIDE the mind of the union steward – *why is this issue so important to her, what caused her to take the issue to OSHA, what does she hope to*

accomplish, what's next and how does this connect with other things the union is doing.

What's the point of your story?
In a feature story, you have some room to develop your ideas and your characters (much like in a play or a short story). You **don't** have to start with a lead that summarizes the whole piece.

If you create a vivid atmosphere for your readers, it can be very effective to have your characters narrate the story as they see it. Say the carpal tunnel story starts off with the union steward walking with the OSHA inspector conducting an investigation. Describe the scene as the OSHA inspector first visits with local management and the union steward: management's reaction, the inspector's questions, the steward's demeanor and tone. The description ends with the walk-around-inspection and the steward takes over telling the story in her own words. By sharing some details about other aspects of the complaint, and quoting other union safety activists, the whole feature can unfold within the atmosphere of the inspection day. Just be sure that whatever approach you use allows you to stay with the initial idea and main sub-topics.

Your role as a feature writer is that of narrator. You take all the pieces of information that you've assembled and decide how to put them together. Build a complete jigsaw puzzle, using your own perspective to envision and then assess the final result. You are there to fairly and accurately represent different people and ideas from a union perspective, and to challenge the reader to draw their own conclusions about who and what to believe.

End the feature story with a call to action. When writing a feature story about anything related to the union, it's almost always appropriate to end the feature with a call to action. What can the reader do to work for change, to build the union or to help the subject of the feature story? Readers that take the time to read a feature story are likely to care enough to want to act and become involved, and as a union feature writer – you need to give them a way to become more involved.

Edit the feature story. Always reread your work. Read it out loud; read it as if you have no knowledge of the subject; pretend you are a critical editor seeing it for the first time; pretend you are one of your targeted readers. **If possible, let it sit for a couple days and then read it again**. Also, consider printing it out and reading it as printed text, because things read differently on paper than they do on screen.

Editing – and *cutting* in particular – almost always has to happen. It helps to hear someone else suggest what passages they think aren't crucial, what sentences need to be tightened up, where there's clutter that can be eliminated. Of course, you must struggle to find a balance; as the author you are ultimately responsible

for keeping the heart of your story intact…alive…vibrant! So you can't accept every suggested revision, but you also can't stake your feelings to every sentence you've ever written.

HINT: If you get sick and tired of reading over your own piece during the revision process, show it to a friend. They will see things that you can't – guaranteed!

Exercise – Read the provided feature story and answer the following questions:

1. What is the feature about – the main focus of the story?

2. Cite three major sub-topics, or angles, used to explore aspects of the main idea.

3. For each of the above three sub-topics, cite one piece of evidence the author includes as support. Hint: look for facts or quotes.

4. Cite two sentences where the author uses descriptive, evocative language.

5. List two people that the story quotes, and why they are qualified to serve as appropriate references and sources of authority.

6. Cite the sentence that you think is weakest. Hint: Look for something that is unrelated to the main focus of the story.

7. Comment on something you like about the writer's style.

Exercise – Story Mapping: Brainstorming

Story mapping is a great way to generate your own overview of the story you want to write. Try this exercise in the first steps of story mapping to help get started.

1. What are some general ideas for stories that you could write about? List at least three.

2. Settle on one of the ideas, and cross out the others. Now, brainstorm sub-topics and ideas or things that relate to your main idea. Write down as many angles that relate to your story as you can come up with.

3. List the three or four important related ideas from the above list, and then repeat the brainstorming process: try to come up with as many sub-topics for each of them as you can.

4. Write down three people or organizations you could contact in order to get quotes or information that would address important sub-topics you have brainstormed.

5. What is one sub-topic you came up with that you think should not be included in your story because it shifts the focus to a different angle?

6. What is the most important sub-topic you have found – the one that you think will be a (or the) major theme in your story.

Part 3 - Editing

Editing refers to what we've been doing in this manual: reading and seeing if material is clear, gets and holds your attention, doesn't offend, makes its point. It also involves, for local union newsletter editors, choosing headlines, suggesting or creating internal headlines, looking for and coming up with good leads for the article, and making sure paragraphs are short and readable.

Nancy Brigham has come up with some clear guidelines for editing in her classic *How to do Leaflets, Newsletters and Newspapers*, 1982. (borrowed and used with permission).

Editing guidelines

First, edit the newsletter yourself, and then have a member of your newsletter committee edit. Have a local union officer look over articles if you have questions about their appropriateness.

Ask yourself some questions while reading....

1) Did you understand it all the way through?

2) Can you tell what the main point of the story is?

3) Do you find yourself reading a sentence twice?

4) Does the story put you in the mood the writer intends?

5) Are there words you don't understand? Ask the writer to replace them.

6) Does the writing sound as natural as someone talking to you?

7) Does the article raise questions that are left hanging?

Editing helps make your paper a group effort. If everyone is concerned only with his or her own article, it's more like writing a letter to the editor of someone else's paper than putting out a group publication. People work alone and don't get to know each other. Editing raises issues that should be discussed and keeps members of the group in touch with each other.

One important rule of editing: never, ever make major changes behind the writer's back. If you're really too busy to go over changes with the writer, don't change anything.

Part 4 - Basic Writing Tips

Tip #1 – Use short sentences

Using short sentences will make your writing plainer and clearer. Long-winded sentences with 20 or more words can usually be broken into two or three shorter sentences. Using short sentences will also greatly simplify punctuation.

First draft

If there are any items that require further explanation or raise additional questions, Local leadership would be glad to discuss the items with you by telephone.

Second draft

If you have questions, please call the local president.

First draft

High-quality union education programs are a necessary precondition for facilitation and enhancement of the union stewards' essential skills and abilities.

Second draft

Union stewards need high quality labor education programs to develop essential skills.

First draft

At the union meeting, Mike Johnson explained the details of management's latest proposal including a discussion of the new overtime language and fielding questions from the membership.

Second draft

At the union meeting, Mike Johnson explained management's latest proposal. He discussed the new overtime language and answered questions from members.

Exercise - Rewrite the following long-winded sentences:

1. *At last month's union meeting there was a long and sometimes heated debate over Bill Hanson's motion to send Julie Jackson, our union's long time newsletter editor, to the Labor Press Association conference in Reno, Nevada, this coming August.*

2. *Over one thousand area union members traveled to Washington, D.C., to meet with their Senators and Representatives to lobby for the Employee Free Choice Act, a bill that would help to restore workers' rights to organize in the United States.*

Tip #2 – Use short paragraphs

Skimming through the pages of a newspaper, you'll notice that the paragraphs tend to be very short often with only two or three sentences. The reason for this is that shorter paragraphs are easier to read. They are also easier to write.

When to start and stop a paragraph depends on its content. Writers should start a new paragraph for each new idea or concept. All sentences in a paragraph should relate to same idea or topic. Whenever you write a sentence covering a different idea, start a new paragraph. Usually it's best to start a new paragraph each time the speaker changes, unless the two speakers are speaking to each other or about the same topic.

First draft

At the union meeting, Local President, Mike Johnson, explained management's latest proposal on overtime distribution. He explained the proposal and fielded questions from the members. A motion was passed to pass out copies of the proposal to every member on Thursday, August 6th. Johnson also asked for suggestions on where to hold this year's union picnic. Darla Sanchez suggested Pleasant Creek Park and everyone liked the idea. A motion was later passed to hold the union picnic at Pleasant Creek Park.

Second draft

At the union meeting, Local President, Mike Johnson, explained management's latest proposal on overtime distribution. He answered questions from members. Members passed a motion to hand out copies of the proposal to every member on Thursday, August 6th.

Johnson also asked for suggestions on where to hold this year's union picnic. Darla Sanchez suggested Pleasant Creek Park and everyone liked the idea. Later, members passed a motion to hold the union picnic at Pleasant Creek Park.

All of the sentences (above) deal with topics discussed at a recent union meeting, but there is an obvious break point. The first sentences deal with management's latest proposal on overtime distribution and the last three sentences deal with the union picnic. Splitting the paragraph into two makes it easier to read and eliminates confusion.

Exercise – Rewrite the following sentences and place into paragraphs.

There was a lot of discussion at last week's union meeting about the most recent grievance filed over management's vacation scheduling restrictions and whether or not to purchase a new computer for the local union. Sara Jackson, chief steward, said that the grievance was in no way an easy win for the union, but that based on past-practice she believed the union had a strong case. Jackson said that the first step grievance meeting is scheduled for August 8 at 3:00 p.m. John Hanson, local treasurer, reported on the costs of a new computer. After comparing prices and features, he said that the union could purchase a new computer for $1,575 without software, but with a newer processor able to handle any of the software the local would need to purchase. Later a motion passed to spend up to $1,600 on a new computer for the local union.

Tip #3 – Replace wordy phrases and buzzwords with simpler alternatives

Shortening phrases and sentences doesn't mean "dumbing down" a message or losing precision and effect. Instead the idea is to make it easier to read and produce meaning clearly and concisely. Avoiding prepositions and conjunctions that consist of more than one word is one way to shorten sentences. Most multiword prepositions and conjunctions can be replaced by a simple word like *if, for, to, by, about* or *since*. The table below illustrates this.

Writers should also avoid using buzzwords. Buzzwords are words or phrases that sound technical, but are really used only to impress or confuse the reader. The table below illustrates a number of common buzzwords overused by many writers.

Buzzwords and trade jargon may be distinguished. Trade jargon is specialized terms or phrases used by a trade, profession or other group. For example, "steward" is a term that most union members will understand even though the general public may not. Using a limited amount of jargon like this is appropriate when confident the reader will understand the term. When in doubt about whether the reader will understand a term, explain the term or select a different word.

Alternatives to wordy phrases, buzzwords and pretentious words

Wordy Phrase	Alternative		Buzzword	Alternative
in the event that	if		*outside the box*	*creative*
in many cases	often		*24/7*	*continuously, day and night*
in spite of the fact	*though, although*		*synergy*	*working together, combined action*
during such time	*while*		*out of the loop*	*uninformed*
as per your request	*as requested*		*best practice*	*better approach or method*
at this point in time	*now*		*game plan*	*plan*
at such time	*when*		*all over it*	*interested in*
the reason is that	*because*		*proactive*	*act, take action*
given a promotion	*promoted*		*win-win*	*both benefited from*
in a timely manner	*promptly*		*team player*	*works well with others, compliant*
come to an end	*end*		*touch base*	*meet, talk, get back*

Exercise - Rewrite the following sentences replacing any wordy phrases or buzzwords with simpler alternatives.

1. *It would be safe to say that the membership overwhelmingly opposes management's latest offer.*

2. *In an effort to stem off management's goal of weakening the union, we will be proactive by organizing the contract workers hired in the loading department.*

3. *Under the terms of the contract, we are compelled to grieve management's actions so as to effect these changes in a timely manner.*

4. *Hearing protection should be worn if conditions are such that the Worksafe Exposure Standards are likely to be exceeded.*

Discussion

What buzzwords are most common where you work? Can you create simpler alternatives for the buzzwords?

Who is most likely to use buzzwords – union member or managers? Why?

What jargon is commonly used? How can you know what jargon is safe to use for your readers?

Tip #4 – Use the active voice

Nearly every writing guide tells writers to use the *active voice* rather than the *passive voice.* But what does this mean?

Sentences written in the active voice have the following structure:

	do-er	***action***	***receiver***
Examples:	*Unions*	*better*	*our society.*
	The arbitrator	*sustained*	*the union's grievance.*
	At the union meeting, we	*agreed*	*to leaflet the gate.*

In active voice sentences, the *do-er* is clearly identified at the beginning of the sentence. Sentences written in passive voice start with the *receiver* of the action and either end with the *do-er* or hide the *do-er* altogether.

	receiver	***action***	***by whom***
Examples:	*Our society*	*is made better*	*by unions.*
	The union's grievance	*was sustained*	*by the arbitrator.*
	The union's grievance	*was sustained.*	*(do-er hidden)*
	At the union meeting, it	*was agreed*	*to leaflet the gate.*

Writers that use the active voice create sentences that sound more direct and vigorous than with the passive voice. Writers may prefer to use the passive voice when they have reason to hide the *do-er* in sentence. For example, it may not be important to identify the person who offered a motion at a union meeting – what's important is that a motion was made. So you might write the sentence as follows: *A motion was made and passed to conduct informational picketing at the Post Office on August 5, 2007.* While using the active voice in the majority of cases will improve your writing style, you may decide from time to time that it's more appropriate to use the passive voice in order to hide the do-er.

Exercise – Rewrite the following sentences in the active voice.

1. *Management's latest offer was overwhelmingly opposed.*

2. *A counter offer will be made next week based on ideas generated at Monday's union meeting.*

3. *Management's failure to follow the overtime list must be grieved to protect the rights of all members.*

4. *Discipline may result from the inappropriate use of email at work.*

Tip #5 – Use definite, specific, concrete language

Verbs such as *is, are, was, were,* and *has been* make your writing sound flat and bureaucratic. To turn dull into engaging writing, change *being* verbs into *doing* ones. For example:

First draft

I was at the Labor Press Conference last week, and was able to learn a lot.

Second draft

I learned a lot at the Labor Press Conference last week.

Definite and concrete writing holds the reader's attention and call up pictures in the reader's mind. One way to do this is to look for strong verbs. Strong verbs relate to the five senses – touch, sight, smell, sound and taste or to our emotions. Examples of strong verbs include: *take, fight, run, demand, build, destroy, spark, attack, or love.* Weak verbs don't call up pictures in the readers mind, for example: *employ, construct, postpone, modify, reduce, indicate, or inform.*

For example:

Weak verb sentence

Together we will develop a stronger union.

Strong verb sentence

Together we will build a stronger union.

Whenever possible writers should use verb forms rather than noun forms of action words.

For example:	***noun form***	***verb form***
	to conduct an investigation	*to investigate*
	Juan made a motion to…	*Juan moved to…*

Writers should make definite assertions and put statements in the positive form. Use the word ***not*** as a means of denial rather than to evade.

For example:

Negative form	*Jane's boss did not remember to ask for volunteers.*
Positive form	*Jane's boss forgot to ask for volunteers.*

More examples:

First draft

Sara showed great satisfaction as she was handed the award for Steward of the Year.

Second draft

Sara smiled as she accepted the award for Steward of the Year.

First draft

Without sufficient proof of guilt, management's decision to terminate John Nelson for sleeping on the job was improper.

Second draft

Management improperly terminated John Nelson because no one actually saw Nelson sleeping on the job.

Exercise – Rewrite the following sentences using definite, specific, concrete language.

1. *Martina is able to attend the Labor Press Conference next week.*

2. *By not participating in the meeting, management has hindered the bargaining process.*

3. *The termination of our union steward is a form of unlawful retaliation.*

4. *Mark did not pay attention to the warning on the machine guard.*