

Structuring a News Bulletin

Written by Tamzin Byrne

This factsheet will talk you through writing a short news bulletin for radio or TV. This is for a brief news update, the kind of news you might hear 'on the hour'. Longer news bulletins would follow the same principles, but with more details and a wider range of perspectives.

An hourly news bulletin is all about sharp, punchy writing. Give us the facts quickly and concisely. Write in active sentences. Tell us what's going on in the world, but don't get bogged down in detail.

A good, short bulletin might include:

- 2-3 local or national stories
- 1-2 international stories
- something quirky or light, like an odd-spot, to balance out all the bad news
- 2-3 very brief sports stories (with a variety of sports, local and international)
- a gossip or entertainment news story
- today's weather, with a brief forecast for the week
- a quick traffic report (road or public transport)

Do your research and choose some stories

Try to get a variety of perspectives. Read a newspaper that you don't normally read, or look at a news site from overseas. Flick through the papers and online news sites and see what everyone else is covering today. Aim for a variety of serious and light-hearted, local and overseas.

Try these online news sites for starters:

Australia

www.theage.com.au and www.smh.com.au	Melbourne and Sydney broadsheets, left-leaning
www.news.com.au	National site, mostly tabloid papers, right-leaning
www.theaustralian.com.au	Serious national paper, lots of politics and business news, unashamedly right-wing
www.abc.net.au/news	Publically-funded radio and TV news service, strictly unbiased
aap.com.au	Wire service for Australia, mostly short news, very factual

Worldwide

www.guardian.co.uk	British newspaper, very popular worldwide
www.independent.co.uk	smaller British newspaper, left-leaning
www.bbc.co.uk	British public radio and TV
www.washingtonpost.com	American newspaper, lots of political news
www.huffingtonpost.com	online only American news, mix of serious news and culture
www.reuters.com	wire service – the news that Journalists use – concise and accurate

Summarise the stories in your own words

It's super important that you don't use the same words that you read in the paper. Sometimes it's hard – there are only so many ways to phrase a particular fact. But you absolutely must use different words, otherwise you're plagiarising someone else's work.

A typical story might look like this.

Sentence 1 – the lead.

Give us the facts. What happened? Who was involved?

Sentences 2-4 – the body.

Expand on the facts and put them in context. What are the other relevant details? Why is it important? You can always lean on the five old school W's – who, what, when, where, why. Resist the urge to editorialise. Your audience doesn't really care what you think, they just want to know what the story is. When presenting the news, you must always take care to ensure you are not adding your own bias or opinion.

Last sentence – the conclusion.

Something short to wrap it up. Perhaps you could link back to an earlier story. Or you might suggest how the story will progress. You could highlight a contrary view, mention some disagreement or point of tension.

For example:

Melbourne Zoo is getting ready for the birth of a new baby elephant.

It'll be the second for Kulab, an 11 year old Asian elephant. This is only the second elephant calf to be born at Melbourne Zoo. It will be a half brother or sister for little Mali, who was born earlier this year.

After her one-and-a-half year pregnancy, zoo-keepers say that Mum is healthy and well, and she'll be fine to deliver her baby in the next week.

To write this story, I used:

- A story from two newspapers
- The Melbourne Zoo website – they had a press release there, with some useful elephant facts. You can't always rely on pressers. You need to ask yourself who wrote it and what their agenda might be. But they are a useful tool, so long as you apply your most journalistic scepticism to whatever you read there.
- Wikipedia, for info about elephant pregnancy. Obviously, Wikipedia isn't infallible, but for simple facts (like the length of elephant gestation), it is usually accurate.

Get your facts straight

If you're getting your information from more than one source, this should be easy. Pick the facts that everyone agrees on. Sometimes one source will make a big claim – it might be interesting, but a surprising fact needs to be confirmed by another source before you should report it. An extraordinary claim demands extraordinary evidence.

Resist the temptation to jump to conclusions. If you can't confirm a fact, don't include it. You need to be very careful that everything you say on-air is totally factually accurate.

Don't forget to check basic facts – like statistics, dates and pronunciation of names. Don't rely on the work of other journalists on the main news sites, check the facts yourself. In the age of Google, it's not hard to do a little research.

How to handle bad news

Sometimes it's hard to speak about disasters, wars and other awful things. They're often the biggest news stories, so it's important to include them, but be aware of your audience. What are they doing right now – eating breakfast, driving in the car, sitting with young children. Be sensitive to the fact that people might not want to hear about a war in the middle of their favourite music show.

You can deliver the facts of an event without dwelling on them. Don't place blame, or glorify an event – people aren't listening to you for your opinion, they just want to know what happened.

If you ever report a story about suicide, domestic violence or mental illness, it's good practice to include information about where to get help. Something simple, like: "remember, you can call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or the SANE helpline on 1800 18 SANE for help and information".

Weather and traffic

You can get the latest weather from the Bureau of Meteorology – in Australia, that's bom.gov.au

Just cover the basics:

Today's weather: rainy with a top of 15. Later in the week, we're expecting more rain with temperatures in the high teens. Right now, it's 8 degrees.

In Melbourne, you can check the [Vicroads website](#) for road traffic, [the Metro website](#) for train delays and the [Yarra Trams website](#) for tram information. These sites are sometimes slow to update, so if you have time, jump on Twitter and search for 'vicroads', 'metro' and 'yarra trams' – they will often post there before they update their official site. Other commuters will often post news of delays on Twitter as well.

Again, just write a basic warning – if people are really interested, they'll check the website themselves:

Delays on the Eastern and the Westgate freeways. Cancellations on the Werribee and Sandringham lines. Busy tram traffic on St Kilda Rd.

Write some brief headlines

Radio and TV shows with bulletins on the hour will often include headlines on the half hour. Give people the gist, usually just the first sentence from each of your stories. Don't treat this like a teaser – people aren't going to stay tuned for another half an hour just to hear you read the full news! You need to write the briefest summary which includes the most important facts. From our example story above, I'd probably cut back to "Melbourne Zoo is preparing for the birth of a second elephant calf".

Putting the finishing touches

You'll be reading your bulletin live, so lay out your page in a way that's easy to read, like this:

- Use – and ... to help your words flow
- Spell out UN-fam-ILL-i-ar words and names – this isn't a spelling test, you can write them any way that will help you say them right
- Use a big clear font, perhaps size 14 Arial or Times New Roman
- Break up your stories with a line of dashes

- Make sure that the pages don't break the
- Flow of your bulletin
- Number your pages – don't be the dude who's pausing to shuffle paper on air

The legal stuff

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is using someone else's work as your own. It can be hard when you're getting news from other news stories. Pick a different fact to focus on, or find a new angle to highlight. If you read a wide variety of sources and avoid using the same phrases, you should be OK.

Defamation

To defame is to harm someone's reputation or lead people to ridicule, avoid or despise someone. For example:

Rove McManus doesn't wash his hands after he goes to the toilet.

Rove would be pretty upset if you said that was true on air and if he cared enough, he could get you and your station into all kinds of trouble.

When presenting news, you can argue that what you're saying is the truth, but you'd better be sure. You can also justify it if you're reporting someone else's words, but you should make it clear that you're quoting someone else, and you need to put it into context.

If you're hesitating, ask yourself: is it really newsworthy? Is it important to the story? Is it in the public interest?

To read a fact sheet all about Defamation, please visit the training portal of the SYN website.

Allegedly

A useful word, but seriously overused. Use 'allegedly' in the context of an unresolved court case or arrest, when we're not sure yet if someone is really guilty. For example:

Bob Smith is alleged to have murdered three people.

You're saying here that we're not sure yet if Bob Smith is really the murderer.

Don't use it when you're reporting on the actual facts of a situation:

Three people were allegedly murdered in Swanston St today.

There's nothing 'alleged' about that – they're really dead and all of Swanston St saw it. You could say:

Three people were murdered and the alleged killer, Bob Smith, was taken into custody.

And 'allegedly' is not a get-out-of-jail-free card. You can't just add 'allegedly' and say what you like. If you're unsure about the facts of your story, you need to confirm them from multiple sources, or just leave them out.

Naming minors and subjects of court cases

Sometimes a story will involve an ongoing court case or an underage person. There are rules about whether or not you can name people publicly in those circumstances. Chances are that you won't know who they are anyway, because no other news outlets will mention their name. But if you do happen to know, use your discretion. If you're not sure whether it's appropriate, don't say it. Community stations can't afford to be sued!

Want to give newsreading a go?

There are lots of opportunities for young people to read news on-air. Contact your local community radio station and find out if they have hourly news updates. Many universities also have a campus radio station. They usually won't have enough people, so they'll be keen for new volunteers. Some stations let you record the news from home and send it in for them to play, even if you don't live in their local area.

Check out the [CBAA website](#) for details of community radio stations in Australia.

And, if you live in Melbourne and you're aged between 12 and 25, [SYN Media](#) is always looking for volunteer newsreaders.

Useful resources

- ABC editorial policies

<http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/edpols.htm>

There's useful info in here about structuring bulletins that are unbiased and accurate.

- FreeTV code of conduct – commercial TV in Australia

<http://www.freetv.com.au/Content/Common/pg-Code-of-Practice.seo>

Flick through to the part about "accuracy, fairness and respect for privacy in news and current affairs"

- BBC news style guide

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/radio_newsroom/1099302.stm

This is a very comprehensive guide for professional BBC journalists. They acknowledge that even their best newsreaders won't be able to follow all of these guidelines all of the time.

About the writer

Tamzin Byrne, 26, volunteered at SYN Media for a number of years in various roles including presenter, producer and SYN Radio Programming Manager. In 2009, Tamzin won the Radio Producer of the Year Award at the annual SYN Awards Ceremony for her work as Executive Producer of 'Panorama'.