



PBS NEWSHOUR

STUDENT REPORTING LABS

Lesson 1.2 B: How to Tell a Good Story

PBS NewsHour Producer Anne Davenport explains how she tells the best possible story.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR STUDENTS MAKING A NEWS REPORT FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME?

Be passionate, have fun and fulfill a purpose larger than your own. Reporting the news always has been and remains a *public* service. So be clear about the reason you are doing what you are doing and then figure out the best approach to the actual story at hand.

What is the story about? What voices are necessary and beneficial for telling the story (i.e. whom to interview)? What are the other elements or “building blocks” which compose a nicely told, visual, compelling TV story. This is important to keep your audience’s attention. A good video report is more than bites strung together. Are there some graphics you could make? Some archival footage? Some footage of real people who represent larger trends you can film (and maybe interview those people).

Run your ideas by your teacher and mentor, but also your peers. The more contributing minds the better. That’s how good ideas are born. Don’t be afraid to shift gears, change courses if the story takes a turn. Adjust to where the reporting takes you. It’s a journey; not a finite path. Good to have a plan but be ready to be flexible and fluid.

Stories do have a beginning, middle and an end. And you still need to check on the Who, What, Where, When , Why...Even seasoned journalists sometimes forget.

HOW DO YOU GRAB THE AUDIENCE’S ATTENTION?

Open with your strongest video IF it is useful in telling an important editorial point. In other words, don’t start on a speaker from a podium at a press conference if there’s a way to show compelling video and maybe a story of a person affected by or instrumental in the issue at hand. Then go to your ‘experts’ etc. as you broaden out the story. Strong SOUND is also crucial. Natural sound up (the sound of a protest, kids playing, the school bell) can grab people. More and more people “watching” TV are actually busy doing other things and are listening and sometimes get a feed of programs like the NewsHour on the radio.

HOW DO YOU DECIDE ON A STRUCTURE FOR YOUR STORY?

Gather your elements and then stop and really think about what makes the most sense before launching into write the piece. Edit it and play around with moving elements and see what jibes best. Pieces are like a jigsaw puzzle except, in this case, there’s no RIGHT or ONLY way to proceed. There are ways that are more effective than others though.

You'll know it when you see it/hear it...Ask others to review. Does it convey to the viewer why he/she should care.

HOW DO YOU CHOOSE SOUND BITES?

Try to pick sound that does not replicate the lead in line to it. Try to pick bites which convey EMOTION or AMPLIFICATION or something that you wouldn't say in the correspondent track. In other words, you don't need someone to say, "The roads are going to be shut today at 3pm." The narrator can say that in the track. Instead use the sound bite from the interview that expands on the information: "The reason the roads are being shut is because we fear danger on the slippery side roads that haven't been plowed" ...That would be amplification. Or, emotion would be, "I'm really scared that when the roads are shut down, people won't be able to get home to loved ones."

HOW DO YOU MAINTAIN BALANCE?

Interview a variety of people on the phone FIRST. These "pre-interviews" are essential so you are not surprised by what folks say when you show up and roll a camera. Yes, people may say something different than they did on the phone in some cases but generally, what they say in person should hew to what they said on the phone. Balance can be subjective. Have lots of people view your work before air—a mini focus group. There are shades of gray in some arguments so it's good to hear the whole spectrum to the extent you can accommodate that in your report.