

## The Peace Gong Media and Information Literacy Programme

### Writing style for newspapers

1) When you are writing for a newspaper or magazine you must follow the journalistic style of writing.

2) We will not write an essay or whatever that comes to our mind. We should avoid simple generalizations and abstract ideas. Instead we should use anecdotes, quotes, and examples.

3) There will be a structure and format in the news or article that we are writing. As a rule we will not use long word when a short word can do. The writing is explicit, precise and easy to understand. In short there should be clarity in whatever you are writing. We should avoid using the same word more than once in a paragraph. In short, this simple style of writing is called KISS – Keep it Simple and Stupid. For example: Eminent actor Niken passed away on Thursday at the age of 65 after a long and courageous battle with cancer. Instead it should be: Eminent actor Niken died of cancer on Thursday. He was 65.

4) **What is News?** Anyone aspiring to write or take up some issues must have an understanding of what is news. Though social, political and cultural contexts influenced on how ‘news’ can be defined; in simple terms it can be described as something that is ‘new’ and ‘significant’. News is something:

- a) Is new to the readers
- b) Is factual
- c) Is about people
- d) Is relevant to the readers, viewers and listeners
- e) Is often dramatic and out of the ordinary
- f) Often involves conflict
- g) Can be something that someone doesn’t want us to report.
- h) Is perishable

The cardinal principles which govern the news value of an event or issue are:

- a) **Human Interest:** If a story highlights the human elements, it can be described as a human interest news story. These stories can be further categorised into several sub-elements. Everyone, a reader or a listener or a viewer has his or her own preference. You may be interested in political developments, another in business and finance. Yet another in sports and so on. Thus choices, tastes and preferences vary from person to person. These can be endless. This is

known as personal appeal in the media jargon. Every medium attempts its best to cater to these diversified choices and their content formats reflect the compulsions of reaching out to different strata of the media audience.

- b) **Conflict:** A controversial angle in a story makes it interesting. Sports contents are of intense conflicts, riding emotions, cricket, hockey and soccer matches are of intense emotions. Sports occupy a major chunk of space and time in media. Many sports persons have become national icons and command a huge following of fans. Sympathy for the underprivileged and underdogs is not new. People sympathise with those who are in distress or difficult situations and many even extend a helping hand. Problems of others touch our heart and we, either individually or collectively, many take initiatives to mitigate them. A new born child left out by the mother in a hospital, or an old ray picking woman confined to a railway platform to spend her nights many evoke sympathy. People dying of hunger in distant Sudan will make us feel sad. Our generosity may surface to donate either in cash or kind. Where there is a conflict, there is scope for sympathetic actions and reactions.
- c) **Timeliness** is an important factor of news selection. Any story published or broadcast or telecast should have the value of timeliness. No news shall appear stale.
- d) **Proximity:** Issues or events happening within the periphery of readers have greater chance to be featured in the local media.
- e) **Magnitude:** The impact of some events or issues is so large that the news media cannot ignore them.
- f) **Prominence:** Prominent people make news. It is a great news value these days. It is the basis of celebrity journalism. In every sector of human activities, we have 'stars'. Politicians, film personalities, musicians, painters, corporate honchos and other important persons make news either for right or wrong reasons. Film stars make news naturally as most youngsters are interested in the personal lives.
- g) **Oddity:** If there is something unusual, out of the ordinary and has the ability to capture the imagination of the public, it makes news.
- h) **Immediacy** is the watch word in news selection. People lose interest in events reported late, unless they are of historical significance.
- i) **Recency** dominates news selection more than any other news selection element. The curiosity of the people to what is latest is responsible for the very birth of journalism. Particularly the electronic media focus on what is happening at the moment. Live broadcasting/telecasting is responsible for the revolution in newscasting.
- j) **Competitiveness is the core of all progress of humanity.** The element of competition can be seen politics, sports and even in

education to register laurels. Cultural events can also have the element of competition. The achievers are honoured across the social spectrum. The audience interest ultimately decides what news is and what is not. However, these are universally accepted parameters to select news for publication or transmission. Unusualness and human interest are always intertwined. Media persons always search for something unusual to capture audience attention.

5) A news story or article is written in an '*inverted pyramid style*'. It means the most important and interesting elements of the story coming in the first few paragraphs, followed by supporting information and other elements coming in the order of diminishing importance. The central principle is that the reader comes first. The story should be direct, attract their attention and make them want to read the report.

6) The '*inverted pyramid style*' gives the reader an option of quitting before s/he has read the entire story, even though the reader has understood the essence of the story. It allows the reader to enter a topic to the depth till it interests her/him. This style of news writing saves the time of readers, who can see at a glance from the first sentence itself whether the story is worth following.

The fundamental purpose of inverted pyramid structure is not to keep the reader or audience guessing but to present facts rapidly, clearly accurately and simply. This structure also helps editing, allowing stories to be quickly cut down to fit into a smaller space on the page.

7) Before you start writing, analyze what is the story about and why it is important? Ask yourself why should the reader read the story and what does the story mean to them.

8) It is important that you write accurately. Ensure that it is factually correct, no distortion of information, names of institution/ individuals are correct.

9) The fundamental style of writing news are the 5 W's and 1 H. These are who, what, when, where, why and how. These should get reflected in the first two paragraphs atleast. This also reflects the '*inverted pyramid style*'.

10) There should be a human touch to what you are writing. It takes a story from abstract to reality. This offers personal elements that help readers understand the story.

11) *The first paragraph is called the lead*. The lead is the most important aspect of the story. It should be focused, effective and short. It should entice the reader to

read further. A poor lead will make the reader move away from reading the story further. The second paragraph amplifies the lead. The third paragraph continues to build the detail.

In fact following from the lead, the story proceeds to the explanation, laying out the main facts of the article/story, the individuals or organizations involved, and the issues of debate. The amplification takes up further points of interest, delves into more detail, elaborates initial perspectives in more depth or provides more colour or extended quotations from participants. The closing may tie-up the piece, pulling together various strands of the story, or offering a speculative tone, often through a direct quotation from a participant. But it should not contain fresh information or introduce an important new theme.

### **Common problems in leads**

- Cluttered. More than one idea appearing in the lead.
- Out of focus. It says, "I don't know what this story is about."
- Dull. No energy that drives the writing forward.
- Mechanical. No human voice, no "music" and uninteresting.
- Closed. A private conversation between those who speak the same jargon. It says, "Stay away. You don't know enough to read this."
- Predictable. Written in journalese or bureaucratese. Cliches. No surprises, no unexpected words or phrases that are unexpected and that delight us as they capture and clarify a news event.

- **Qualities of Effective Leads**

- Focus. Make a specific promise to the reader, and then deliver.
- Context. Involve the reader. Show clear, immediate significance. Answer the question, "Why should I read this story?"
- Form. Implies a design, a plan, a structure, a pattern that will help the reader understand the meaning.
- Information. Whets the readers appetite, promises delivery.
- Voice. A human voice talking to the reader. Provides the "music" to support the meaning of what is being read.
- Surprise. The promise of something new.

As the lead is the most important aspect of the story, the reporters should ask the following questions while developing the lead:

Does the lead have both its elements: news and significance

Does the lead capture the most important aspect of the story? Could a different lead highlight a different aspect of the story?

How can the lead be made more concise? Which words and phrases can be cut or combined?

Is the lead clear?

12) A paragraph should preferably not more than 25-30 words.

13) Quotes are important to substantiate your story. When you are quoting someone write the exact name of person, his/her designation, and institution attached with etc.

14) The quotes must be relevant to the story and not something which is off the mark. They should be focused and must contribute to the story. The best quotes are short and bright. They surprise, shock or amuse. They reveal insights or secrets. They prove points. They allow experts to give perspective, and real people to air grievances. Don't quote simple statements of fact.

15) When you write a story, you must ensure that you have adequate background information to be able to understand and write the story. For instance, if you yourself have not understood the issue, you will not be able to make the audience understand. Avoid boring or unrelated details. Give exactly the information, no more and no less, that can help the reader understand.

#### 16) Different types of stories:

**News:** A report about an event or a trend. It should be punchy, balanced and relatively short. It should be newsworthy. The 5 Ws and 1 H are the basic elements of news. It strictly follows the inverted pyramid style of writing.

**Feature:** An extended narrative allowing more in-depth reporting into an event, a trend, a place or a personality. The feature article also maintains an inverted pyramid model. But it is not so rigidly tied to the strict scientific presentations of facts and fact-based analysis; a feature is slightly more artistic or literary.

**Analysis:** An analysis of a news event or a trend, often quoting a range of protagonists and experts, analysis may suggest a viewpoint but should present a diversity of opinions.

**Comment:** A partisan viewpoint, presenting a personal perspective and often a strong argument, including recommendations for addressing a problem.

17) News stories can be divided into two types: **hard news** and **soft news**. Hard news primarily refers to events etc that are reported immediately. While soft news is background information or human-interest stories. A hard news story takes a factual approach” What happened? Who was involved? Where and when did it

happen? Why? A soft news story tries instead to entertain or advise the reader. Arts, entertainment and lifestyles are generally considered soft news.

### **18) Finding and Developing story ideas**

Alert. We have to keep our eyes and ears open.

Develop reading habits. We can get story ideas from newspapers and other sources.

Think of a children's angle to the story we are trying to work upon.

Do proper research.

Talk to people related to the subject. Develop a list of people to be interviewed for the story.

Get facts and figures from official sources.

### **19) Sourcing**

- a) Sources are the building blocks of any story. We must ensure that we have the correct source and we will be able to do the story easily.
- b) For instance if you are writing a profile of an individual- especially a critical one- it is important that we speak to him/her.
- c) If we are trying to write about a conflict, we must speak to both the sides.
- d) If we are writing on some issue like health in our district, speak to a diverse selection of people like doctor of the area, district health officials, common people, concern children.
- e) If the article is on the basis of any report or document, try to get hold of the original document and the source of the document should be quoted.
- f) Always write from where and how the information was obtained. For example, 'said at a seminar...' etc.
- g) Write complete details of the source- full name of the person, designation etc. Like Smt Tushita Bora, teacher of Lahoal High School, Dibrugarh.

### **20) Content Analysis**

Content analysis is probably the oldest way of studying the media and is an answer to the age-old concern with media content. It is a research technique for the objective and systematic description of media content. Through content analysis we can find out how the media covers a particular issue.

Let us take the example of researching how media covers children's issues. The first step is the selection of media or titles. Which type of medium would be selected for the content analysis would be decided first. It could be radio, television, newspaper, magazines or the Internet. If we decide to do content analysis of newspapers, we will then have to decide which newspapers. Or if television is taken, we will have to decide which television channels. We can also analyse across different media.

The second step is to decide how many issues of the publication or what dates of broadcast to select. For instance to do content analysis of children's issues, we can randomly take all the newspapers published from our area for 15 days.

The third step is the sampling of relevant content.

Finally, one must decide on the unit of analysis or recording unit, i.e., the elements to count.

**Example:**

We are doing content analysis of children's issues covered by the media. We take for example 4 newspapers being published in our area.

The time period we take to do content analysis is 15 days.

Next we decide on the categories or the unit of analysis or the elements to count.

The different categories in this case can be:

- a) Type of stories- news, news analysis, features, editorials, advertisements, photographs
- b) Degree of importance given to the story- front page, city page, national page, international page, editorial page
- c) Amount of space given to the story- length x breadth
- d) Nature of stories/ news analysis/ features/ editorials – stories related to schemes related to children like ICDS, primary education, secondary education, higher education, child health, child rights, child development, child labour, child participation, child exploitation.
- e) If it is advertisements, nature of advertisement: positive advertisements, ads promoting commercialization.
- f) If it is photograph, whether it : portrays stereotypes; portrays positive image; portrays negative image

To ensure we are able to easily analyse the issue, we must give codes to the above. Once we have the code, we can analyse the number of times in 15 days a particular item appears. The final analysis will help us understand how children's issues are covered by newspapers and alternatively what the issues related to mostly taken up by the media.

Also we can conduct content analysis taking 2-3 issues and compare how a particular issue is covered. For instance to ascertain the degree of importance given to children's issues by the media, we can take 2-3 other issues. These could be politics, films and entertainment and business. Then we can do a comparative study how children's issues fare vis-à-vis these three issues.

To gain great insight of portrayal of children's issues in the media, children can be encouraged to look critically at the language used and whether media promotes stereotypes.

Example :

21) Consider the following news story:

### **Credibility problem facing Washington Summit**

N. Ram

Washington: The Summit on Financial Markets and the World Economy, which opened over dinner Friday evening at the White House, faces a major credibility problem, notwithstanding the cautious optimism expressed by official India ahead of the event.

Everyone knows that the summit's orchestrator and host, President George W. Bush, is as lame-duck as any lame duck can be. This is not merely because his successor's inauguration is only two months away. Mr. Bush's deep unpopularity at home and abroad, which also derives from the widespread perception that the Bush administration must bear the lion's share of the blame for the global financial crisis, threatens to become a political liability for any policy package agreed at the summit.

According to reports in the American press, the goal of the summit, as defined by the Bush administration, is to "forge an international consensus on the root causes of the crisis and lay the foundations for regulatory changes to prevent a similar meltdown." But the apprehension is that the first part of the agenda might open the door to veiled attacks on the Bush administration's economic policies over eight years, which contributed in a big way to the present debacle of the international financial system.

European leaders, notably France's Nicolas Sarkozy, Britain's Gordon Brown, and Germany's Angela Merkel, and also Australia's Kevin Rudd are following a somewhat different trajectory. In general, they seem to believe the financial crisis could have been averted had there not been a massive failure of regulatory oversight. Mr. Sarkozy, in particular, has been advocating a strong international regulatory regime. Not one to shy away from an ideological skirmish, Mr. Bush, in pre-summit remarks distributed by the White House, called upon the leaders of the major economies not to jettison free-market capitalism. Ironically for a leader who has massively extended the reach of the government in the market through billions of dollars worth of bail-outs, he asserted that "the greater threat to

economic prosperity is not too little government involvement in the market, but too much.”

**In the above news, the story is about the Washington Summit on the World Economy which faces a credibility problem**

**Lets see the 5 W's and 1 H**

Who – George Bush (in 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph)

What – Summit on Financial Markets and World Economy which faces credibility problem

When – Friday evening

Where- Washington

Why- It faces credibility problem due to his unpopularity in home and abroad; his successor will be inaugurated in two months time.

How- Widespread perception that Bush administration must bear the lion's share of blame for the global financial crisis.

After the lead and the 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph, the writer quotes the American press to substantiate the story. In the next paragraph, it talks about the approaches of the other world leader.