

Getting the most out of your standalone pieces | Module 3

[00:00:12] Welcome back. This is the second video for module three on standalone explainers. Today's topics are a bit of a grab bag, things that are important besides writing the actual text of your explainer. We're going to be looking at: headlines, recycling and reusing explainers, and the idea of evergreening, how they can be integrated into the news and news packages and their role in fighting misinformation.

[00:00:44] Let's start with headlines. Headlines are important. A good headline is one of the biggest factors in whether someone who sees your work clicks on it. When I first had to write headlines, I was really bad at it. And not surprisingly, I didn't like it. My boss at the time tried to be encouraging. He used to say the first 10,000 are the hardest. But you won't have to write that many or wait that long to get good at them. Because one lucky thing about explanatory articles is that their headlines don't have to be clever like feature headlines or super compressed like news headlines. They just have to be clear.

[00:01:35] So here's what you should be trying to do. First and foremost, they're letting readers know that the piece is an explainer. You can be very obvious about that. No need to hide what the format is. That could mean starting a headline with "why..." or "how..." or "understanding whatever", or "what to know about X" or "such and such, explained." On our team, that's how about 80% of our headlines start nowadays. In addition to alerting readers to the kind of content that it is, it's an approach that can boost your search ranking as well. Put the key word or key term as near to the start of the headline as you can.

[00:02:27] "Understanding NFTs and the boom in digital art tokens" is better than "understanding the boom in digital art tokens called NFTs." That's true, both in terms of getting your readers attention and in terms of making that article easy to find in search. Give some sense of why this subject matters now. "How crypto regulation changed after the FCX collapse" is better than "understanding crypto regulation and how it is evolving." And of course, be accurate and fair. That doesn't mean putting all sides of the debate into a headline. But if there's significant conflict over a subject, you want to reflect that in the headline, if you can. So if you end up with something that seems more workmanlike than artful, that's fine. For instance, here's a sample of the latest quicktake headlines of the day I'm recording this.

[00:03:36] And here are some headline tips I found useful in general, not just for explainers. Start by writing down the first thing that comes to mind that can give a clue as to what you think the most important aspect of the subject is. Make a list of the most interesting things people or concepts that are mentioned in a piece. Conflicts and incongruities get people's attention. Maybe you can use one of those to make your headline more interesting.

[00:04:12] Next, write a headline but ignore the character count that is the limit on the number of letters you'll actually be able to use. It's easier to come up with a good idea and then make it fit than to take something that fits and just turn it into a good idea. Here are a couple of things to avoid. Try not to use jargon. And what we call "headline-ese," meaning words no one ever says except in bad headlines. Unit Reps panel was my old boss's favorite example of a headline that would mean nothing to anyone.

[00:04:58] Don't try to cover too many aspects of a story. It's better to make one point clearly than to cram two or three in, if what you end up with isn't comprehensible. Don't hype the story. You want your headline to portray a situation as dramatically as possible,

but not at the cost of overstating its facts. Take a little time if you have it, to search for words that are more interesting to the ear or the eye. Here's an example from recent quicktakes by my team. One headline that was "How Europe is surviving during Putin's energy wars" was improved to become "How Europe is muddling through Putin's energy war."

[00:05:52] Writing good headlines can also be a matter of unlearning the habits you learned writing heads that weren't great, but were good enough for wherever you were working. My advice on building up your skills over the long run is to write poetry or song lyrics because those are forms that rely on emotionally resonant language and visual imagery to convey meaning concisely. And even if doing that doesn't radically change your headlines. Well, it's still fun to do.

[00:06:28] So let's talk next about what I'm calling recycling. Before the Internet, people used to say that all yesterday's paper was good for wrapping fish. In the digital age, every article lives forever, and that means that yesterday's work can be more easily made useful today. Last year's work too, a good part of the time. This is especially important for explanatory journalism because a lot of what we explain stays true over time. Nuclear fusion. For instance, as we saw last week, Ken Chang was able to provide an excellent explanation of that for a breaking news story because he had explained it in a feature story years before.

[00:07:21] Almost every stand alone explainer you write has the potential to be recycled and used again. It's as if you're adding books to a library rather than wrapping fish. The quicktake team I'm on has a library of well over a thousand explainers covering as many topics as the newsroom has in the nine years we've been doing this. But, here's the wrinkle: life moves on. And the news today about subject X isn't the same as it was when you first wrote an explainer about it.

[00:07:58] Maybe it's a little thing that's changed. Like somebody who was in office then is out by now, or maybe a policy that was in place has suddenly been dropped like China's COVID zero. Or maybe so many people are so much more familiar with the subject by now. Remember the idea of the arc of familiarity that it no longer needs to be explained in the same way?

[00:08:28] Here are three ways of dealing with that. What is to leave the piece just as it is, and to make clear it's an old piece of work? Maybe the headline starts with a label like "from the archives," or with the date of original publication? Another approach is to update the piece to reflect the new situation. Sometimes this is a small tweak. For instance, last week a colleague of mine updated an explainer on the US government's debt ceiling just by adding that the Republicans who won the election in November now were actually in charge of the House of Representatives.

[00:09:12] Sometimes it can mean extensive revisions when the situation has changed a lot. You might need to rewrite not just the headline but the introduction and big chunks of the text beyond a certain point. It might be easier just to start over and use the older piece as a source of material. We call that "harvesting for spare parts." Our quicktake on Bitcoin, for instance, has been redone from top to bottom several times as the subject went from something exotic to something almost everyone knows at least a little bit about.

[00:09:54] The third option is to do what we call "evergreening" a peice. At least in U.S. journalism an evergreen story is one that's written without reference to research or topical

events. So it can be used almost any time. In contrast to our quick take on Bitcoin, our page on blockchain has stayed pretty much the same for the last several years. It's explaining the functioning of the system at the heart of a lot of cryptocurrencies rather than explain news about its use, so it's pretty easy to keep it evergreen.

[00:10:35] The advantage to evergreening is that the content is always available. I can't remember if I said this in an earlier video, but the fastest way to get something done is to have already done it. So let's talk about integrating explainers. We'll talk a little next week about how to promote your work through search and social media. For right now, I just want to talk briefly about how you can help readers find your explainers within the four corners of your news site.

[00:11:12] What's the first requirement for a reader to be able to find your piece? It has to exist. You have to write it. And given how hard it can be to produce explainers on deadline about breaking news, that's a strong argument in favor of the kinds of recycling and evergreening we just discussed. Packaging stories in an online world is both easier and more complicated than it was when newspapers landed on doorsteps with a thump. Back then, packaging basically meant putting an explainer right next to the news story it was about. Which would make it very easy to find. The alternative was usually not finding room for it at all in that day's paper or cutting it down to what today would be considered a stock.

[00:12:08] Online publishing has meant ripping up the physical bundle of old newspapers with the result that stories can relate to each other in all sorts of ways. An explainer can still run right next to the news story or they can be connected through a link. In the video this week with Lisa Buyer, she used this example of a news story linking to an explainer through what's called a "reefer" by some, a "tout" by others, or just a link. There can be more elaborate ways of guiding readers to explainers. On the morning I'm recording this the lead story in The New York Times is about a demographic milestone in China as more deaths were recorded there in 2022 than births.

[00:13:01] So let's see how they package this. You can see that above that headline there's a banner with a set of related links about the end of COVID zero, including one explainer behind China's U-turn. That banner is populated automatically for every story that is coded to China and to health. According to a rundown of the system I got from an editor there last year. Then within that explainer, if you scroll down, you'll find this reefer box or a "for more" box that brings together links to a handful of stories giving background and context. This is also added algorithmically. I have to admit I am super jealous. We have to add links to our pieces by hand or ask other people at Bloomberg News to help us out, also by hand. Maybe someday we'll all have systems like this in place to make explainers so easy to find.

[00:14:11] Finally today, let's talk about misinformation. I think this module is the right point at which to address this topic as the very act of writing and publishing standalone explainers is an assertion that we believe that fact matter. The background and context matter. The readers need them and care about them, and that meeting those needs serves an important purpose. Let me start by raising a bit of a doubt. We have more explanatory journalism than ever before. Yet we have more misinformation than ever before.

[00:14:53] Does that mean that simply making resources available to readers isn't enough? Or would there be even more misinformation, even more horror if there hadn't been this rise in explanations? I don't know the answer. I don't think anyone does. Or if

they say they do, I'm skeptical, but I don't think this is a reason to stop trying. Journalism today faces a set of overlapping crises, a crisis of resources, a crisis of trust, a crisis of disengagement, and a crisis of misinformation, of what you might call toxic competition from sources that are often pursuing information strategies that are built on bad faith. As individual journalists, there's not a lot we can do about a lot of that. But providing more good explanatory material is something that we can do. And we're not the only ones who think that.

[00:16:04] A recent Reuters Institute survey of publishers found that 94% say they plan to counter news avoidance by readers by increasing explanatory content. So let's look at some of the strengths of explanatory journalism in fighting misinformation. We already know that readers like this kind of content. If you meet your audience where it's at. Thinking back to what we discussed in module one, they're more likely to be engaged. If you do a good job, lay out a subject. Clearly they're more likely to come away feeling better informed. That adds to the credibility of explanatory journalism. And because explainers do well in search ranking and because they're a key component in the rise of popular formats like podcasts, they can be more accessible in the sense of being easy to find, as well as in the sense of being inviting and understandable.

[00:17:11] So here are some things that we can do. In the introductory module, Margaret Sullivan touched on some of these points. Simple repetition is important in countering bad information that can mean creating standalone explainers. That can always be a part of a package or otherwise available for a reader looking at a complex or controversial subject. It can also mean regularly injecting explanatory chunks into news stories, even if you get tired of doing that. Writing and recycling standalone explainers and working to make them findable through search or links moves us toward a goal of always having good information available for our readers. Keeping the fight against misinformation in mind is a strong incentive to work hard for clarity in our writing and transparency about what we do and don't know. In fact, we have some critics where the headlines begin what we do and don't know about whatever is.

[00:18:25] Finally, the size and importance of this task is a good reason for humility. The very first thing I learned when I became a professional journalist is how easy it is to be wrong. Fortunately, it's a lesson I've had to learn the hard way over and over through the years. But knowing that we don't know at all so we're only human is not a reason to pursue our goals any less vigorously. Acknowledging our fallibility underscores the bond we're trying to build with readers as the message in our work is: life is complicated. False explanations aren't easy. Understanding is hard. We're in this together.

[00:19:14] I look forward to this week's online discussions on this point especially. Thank you and be well.