

## How (and why) to do standalone explainers | Module 3

[00:00:12] Welcome to module three. This week we're going to talk about what most people think about when they think about explanatory journalism, a standalone article that takes a subject that you covered in some other news stories and goes into more depth to make it clearer than a regular news story can.

[00:00:34] Creating articles like that is what I do all day for Bloomberg News on our Quicktake pages. It's the core of websites like Vox. It's the goal of efforts like The Upshot of the New York Times and Planet Money on NPR. And by the way, in another video this week, you'll be hearing from our Planet Money host, Mary Chiles. And they're turning up an increasing number of all sorts of new science.

[00:01:04] Let's start by stepping back for a moment to look at why that is. First and foremost, explainers are popular with readers. So traffic they generate can make them an important part of a site's business model. They're cheaper to produce than, say, investigative projects and can be updated and reused, increasing the bang for the buck. For big news events making an explainer part of a package can make writing the main news article easier and can promote reader engagement and satisfaction.

[00:01:43] Explainers can also play a role as part of a strategy for fighting misinformation. Doing standalone explainers can also be hard, and not just because writing them well can be challenging. There are often organizational obstacles to deal with. We'll talk about these not because I have any magic wand solutions, but because they're easier to deal with if you know they exist and can prepare for them.

[00:02:16] Topics we'll cover in this video include: choosing what to explain, who writes it, choosing an angle and a format, going macro or going micro, outlines and the nub or two. What's the best thing to be explaining today? Today's biggest news. Maybe that sounds obvious, but it's still worth stressing that reader interest and page views are not evenly distributed. Big stories get a big share of attention.

[00:02:57] I'm a believer in the idea that news organizations should provide context about all kinds of things for what most of your readers will most want to know more about. Is today's big story. If your newsroom has a social or trending editor who's keeping an eye on what terms are being searched, I'm sure they'll tell you the same thing. But providing depth to the big news is not the same as chasing any and every trending keyword or hashtag.

[00:03:31] Ideally, you want to put your effort into explaining something that not only is getting a lot of attention, but that has real substance that merits explanation. In the US, one of the most popular search queries every year is what time does the Super Bowl start? A lot of people want to know the answer, but answering that isn't really an explanation. One question to ask yourself is what are the most important kinds of subjects for my newsroom and our readers?

[00:04:08] On my team, we call these "wheelhouse topics" and they get priority. For Bloomberg, with its financial focus wheelhouse topics can include some pretty nerdy things about the bond market. Where you work the key topics might be very different. Trying to keep close to the wheelhouse matters for a couple of reasons. It's probably what your readers want. It's also what your newsroom knows best. That can be handy in having things explained by people who really understand them.

[00:04:46] Think about how long the subject is likely to be of interest. Is this a story with legs, as the saying is, or is it a topic that comes up regularly, like the Electoral College in the US? Or is something a great concept or a buzzword that's certain to come up in a lot of stories? Care is the biggest headache or one of the biggest. Who should write the explainer about the big story of the day. The person who covers that subject most closely and who's probably being asked to write the news story. Yep, that person who covers the subject most closely. But, until somebody comes up with a coding device cheaper for newsrooms to use what you might call the expertise squeeze will always be with us. Reporters who tell their editors that they can't do two things at once are, in fact, correct.

[00:05:54] The alternatives in descending order of preferability are: somebody else who covers the same beat or recently used to, somebody familiar with the general subject area waiting for news cycle for someone knowledgeable to be freed up, or waiting a day for someone like that, or throwing any warm body at the assignment. If you're a non-expert who's being thrown off the assignment because it happens. Do the things we talked about last week for researching a nub. Read previously published material carefully and talk to an expert or experts or colleagues. But there's one more thing. If you find yourself in a situation.

[00:06:48] You must insist that somebody who has the expertise for your work looks over the piece before it gets published. Everything not written by a subject expert must be vetted by a subject expert. Otherwise, the results can be embarrassing. It's bad enough to have a mistake in a news story written on deadline. It's much worse to have a mistake in a piece written specifically to give the reader authoritative information. Of course, the best alternative is to not be in this position to write or prepare an explainer in advance of a news event. That can be done surprisingly often if there's a collaborative spirit in a newsroom. But you can't prepare for everything.

[00:07:45] Okay, so you're the writer assigned to put that explainer together. Where to begin? The first step is to decide what it is you're explaining and what format you'll use, saying decide what it is you're explaining. Sounds obvious, but it's not always easy to figure out. You can't explain everything about almost any subject. Think about the pandemic. Where would you begin? But there are any number of slices of that subject that have made for important and useful explainers for our team over the last three years.

[00:08:28] For instance, what is social distancing? Do masks work? What is herd immunity? How do MRNA vaccines work? And what is the Omicron variant? That last one was the most read article of any kind put out by Bloomberg News in 2021. Here's a bit of advice I'll get several times today. Write a preliminary headline. It can be a big help in figuring out just what it is that you're trying to do.

[00:09:06] As we discussed earlier, the most popular format for explainers is the Q&A, question and answer. It's intuitive for both writers and readers and very flexible. Another option is what I call a scorecard, a piece that walks through different items in a different category, like the potential prosecutions Donald Trump could be facing, or four main techniques used by so-called quantitative stock traders. Now that's a real world news explainer topic. There are many other format possibilities, including data visualizations and even annotating documents. But the main point for now is to think about what you want to say and choose a format that fits the subject matter, rather than contorting yourself to fit a model that's not appropriate.

[00:10:02] Here's another way to approach the question of focus. Do you want to zoom in or zoom out? That's how I refer to the question of taking a micro or macro look at a subject to zoom in means to focus on one key aspect of a story, like how the tariffs then President Trump imposed on China actually worked. To zoom out means to help readers by putting the news in a broader context, like a review of the flashpoints of tension between the U.S. and China, one of which was trade. Once again, it can help to try writing a preliminary outline. That's a process that both makes you focus on what is most important and acts as a reality check as to whether readers are likely to be interested in the approach to thinking about.

[00:11:00] Outlines. For me, outlines have always served two main purposes. The most basic one is to work out ahead of time a logical flow of information, if you will, to avoid plunging the reader into a stage as a subject that they can't understand without information you haven't given them yet. The other thing outlines help me with is cutting down on the number of things I forget to put in. I start my outline? Yes, once again by writing a headline, at least a tentative one. We'll talk more in the next video about the craft of headline writing. I'm just bringing this up now to point out again the thinking of this kind of concise summary helps to set you up to organize a piece by forcing you to figure out its key elements.

[00:11:58] Then I write the lead or introductory paragraph for me, an introduction to a standalone news explainer should do three things. It should let the reader know what you're explaining, why it matters, and what the key conflict or question on the subject is. If you're able to make it more interesting by presenting a fact readers might find unexpected. Or to frame the topic in terms of a compelling analogy, that's great. But what you must do is say what you'll be talking about and why it matters. That will often mean referring to whatever news event has led you to write the explainer in the first place, to try to just give a very brief mention here of what that is. That's because one thing an introduction should not do is be comprehensive.

[00:12:59] In fact, my usual practice is to write a great big kitchen sink introduction so I can then cut it down by half or even more. And the things I take out are often a good guide to what should go lower down in the outline. An outline often starts with the history needed to give background to the subject or by defining its key term. You can then lay out what aspects need to be walked through to get to the current situation. The goal is to reach the news after giving readers the material they need to understand it better than they did when they read the news story.

[00:13:44] But since there's no single best way to do anything in journalism, there are times when question one should be some version of what's happening now. That's usually the case when the action is so dynamic that it's easier to give a grounding in the present before going backward to show how things got to that point. Well, we did a Quicktake explainer on the ouster of Peru's president in December. We started with what just happened because so much had just happened.

[00:14:19] The last of the nuts and bolts we'll look at this week is one we looked at last week. A story's nub the crucial point that's unfortunately often the hardest thing to explain. The good news about dealing with the nub in a stand-alone explainer is that you have more room to work with. The bad news is that it's even more important to make sure you're actually conveying what it means. Otherwise, readers who expected a real explanation may go away disappointed or worse, confused.

[00:14:58] So how do we do that? As before, the first step is to make sure you identify the nub. Last week, we looked at an example of market turmoil in Britain last fall that was traced to a financial strategy used by hedge funds there. The readings for this module included an example on Tether the Stablecoin company where the nub concerned what tether was or wasn't doing to back up the value of the crypto token it issues, USDT. In this story about the UK markets, after great efforts, we ended up with a few sentences that gave a sense of what the trouble with pension funds was about. In a stand alone explainer, the reader would expect much more.

[00:15:53] So after identifying the nub, make sure that your outline sets you up to do a deep enough description. It wouldn't be unusual for two or three of the questions in the Q&A to deal with just the nub. Then break the nub into pieces. Introduce concepts one by one. Take your time on this, as it's the most important part of the piece. If you need to get help, get help. I often find that a phone conversation produces more clarity than exchanges of email, both because people tend to use more jargon when they type and because an email back and forth is less interactive than being able to say, "Wait, wait, wait. Back up a minute. I didn't really get that part." And remember, there are no stupid questions.

[00:16:55] Okay, We've covered a lot today. To summarize writing standalone pieces and in many ways the heart of explanatory journalism. Two big reasons for doing this is that readers love these pieces, and that's they're where you can get into much greater depth than you can in a standard news story. These are often team efforts, especially when the topic is related to a big breaking news story that creates an "expertise squeeze." You'll also often have to rely on teammates and others with a greater background is a subject for fact checking and making sure you're focusing on the right aspects. Between the expertise squeeze and the difficulty of making a nub clear. This is a hard thing to do, but your readers will be glad you put in the effort.

[00:17:53] In the second video for this module, which will be shorter, we'll talk about writing headlines for standalone explainers, how to do it, not just that you should be doing it, at the early stage. We'll talk about how to recycle these explainers to get more bang for your buck and about the role they can play in fighting misinformation.

[00:18:17] Thanks for watching, and I'll see you soon.