

Key terms and formats | Module 1

[00:00:12] In the first video, we talked about some fairly complicated ideas, like the imagined audience. Before we get into this week's forums and deeper into the course. I want to take a little time to go over some basics.

[00:00:28] To go over some of the terms we'll be using and give a quick overview of some of the most common mediums and formats for explanatory journalism. But first, a thought and an important lesson for young journalists, at least it was an important lesson for me, is that there's no such thing as a dumb question.

[00:00:50] When you're trying to figure out what's going on, you have to be kind of fearless and you're willing willingness to expose your own ignorance. The flip side of that is that there's no such thing as a question that's not worth answering. That doesn't mean that we can answer them all or can explain everything. That's an impossible goal. But it means that if something is important for helping readers understand what we have to say, it's worth at least, considering how to explain it to them.

[00:01:23] Here are some key terms to think about. Context is a fact or set of facts that make something more understandable by identifying how it relates to other things. You might be puzzled why this person is spending so much money, but it makes sense in the context of a campaign.

[00:01:46] Background. Background is the circumstances that give rise to a situation. Why are all these people fleeing? Well, they're fleeing because the fighting has now moved into their part of the country.

[00:02:03] And analysis. Analysis is not only identifying the key factors in a situation, but making judgments about their importance and consequences. When we analyze, we are making choices about what matters and why. This can be very helpful to our readers and needs to be approached with care so it doesn't turn into what's just our opinion.

[00:02:29] Now let's look briefly at two characteristics that we strive for in explanatory journalism: to be authoritative and to be concise. Authoritative. This could be a whole separate course for ways to make readers trust your writing, including working to really understand the subject. Being open and clear about what you know and what's not known and not clear. Acknowledging all evidence-backed science of a debate. That is, being fair to all sides without legitimizing misinformation and making the sources of your knowledge clear.

[00:03:12] We also want to be concise. This isn't just about writing and cutting and cutting and cutting and cutting. Though it certainly involves that. It's about putting the most important things first, but saving the details about what makes them important until later. Words and structure go together, that allows you to be concise in each spot and to address something and more concise overall. If you've got a plan or format or outline that lets you work through the subject in a logical order.

[00:03:48] In this course we will mostly be talking about text-based articles and in many cases, standard news articles. But there are a variety of other text formats available for explanatory journalism, as well as ways to base it in other media. Here's a quick review of some possibilities and their pluses and minuses.

[00:04:12] Question and answer is the most common format for non-news articles. In some ways it's the most natural, either because the act of asking questions is so innate or because it's used so often the readers expect it, and maybe you've already done it before. The cons: it's an easy format to use to just dump out chunks of stuff that didn't make it into the news article without having to think through what needs to be explained and how. One sign that that's happening is when the Q is a question so no actual human would ever ask.

[00:04:53] Scorecards break a subject down into categories and explain them one by one. This can be a very reader-friendly format and a good alternative where the subject doesn't fall into a neat sequence or narrative as often happens in a Q&A. The downside is that it can end up as a glorified list, which puts information in front of the reader without explaining it. Of course, lists have their place, but they're not necessarily explanatory. Ask yourself, what am I explaining as opposed to just listing?

[00:05:32] News analysis can be a lot like a news article, but structured to strip out the quotes and the kinds of details that take up a lot of space in telling the day's news. This can be a good vehicle for a writer to lay out what she thinks is significant in a way that's hard to do in a news story. On the other hand, it can be a vehicle for a writer to just say what he thinks, which can lead to a blurring of news and opinion.

[00:06:03] An expert interview is a Q&A summarizing an interview with someone who knows the subject well. This is often the fastest option for a piece of explanatory journalism, especially when you yourself are not up to speed on a subject. So the downside is that you're only getting one person's view of the subject. It's less likely to be comprehensive and runs the risk of leaving out some important point of view.

[00:06:33] Now let's turn to alternative media. And of course, whole classes are taught from podcasts and videos, and I'm not going to try and do anything like that here, but I think it's worth quickly going over them in terms of how they work as explanatory vehicles.

[00:06:51] Most podcasts are conversations, which is an excellent, extremely natural way of presenting an explanation. I spoke about this with Sean Rameswaram, the host of Vox Today, Explained podcast, and he made these points. Start at the beginning. Include all viewpoints. Don't skip the complicated parts just because they're complicated. Choose guests who you think are good talkers. And keep in mind, you can make an awkward interview to work in the editing. But it helps to have a plan for if things go off track.

[00:07:33] For videos, I spoke to Alex Webb, a Bloomberg video about explainers in this medium. He said he started with the obvious points that you need visuals for a visual medium and that sometimes can be easy, but with some abstract subjects, you need to work about it and think hard. You also need to work hard at your reporting because video need facts just the way a written explainer would. It helps to try and make video explainers evergreen. And it's partly because these are usually most often found through search on YouTube or somewhere like that. So it helps if you step back from the day's news and put it in a way that makes sense to somebody a week later or a month later. You'll probably be working from a script, but try not to seem scripted.

[00:08:29] And finally, even in video, niche topics can work. The way he put it is that if there are two guys in every pub who like to argue about something that's a small share of all the people in pubs. But they add up to a workable audience on YouTube. Graphics. If a picture is worth a thousand words, a good graphic can be worth two thousand. I think two

kinds are especially helpful for explainers data that it illustrates a central point of a story and flowcharts that layout step by step how a process works.

[00:09:11] The danger is in building a graphic just because you have the data to build it rather than because it speaks to the key point of your piece in a way that's hard to do in words. Another pitfall is simply that making good graphics is much harder and more time consuming than usually expected, or at least I usually expect.

[00:09:35] So I know that's a lot to take in, but I hope this walk-through of key terms and of formats was helpful. I look forward to hearing in the forums about times you've tried one or the other along with questions, comments, and even or especially disagreements. Thank you and I'll see you in the forum.