

## The hard part: How to explain a story's 'nub' | Module 2

[00:00:12] Hi. Welcome back for the second video for module two. In this video, we're going to talk about something that's been mentioned before: how to deal with the thing that's the most important aspect of a subject to explore, and that's often the hardest part of it to explain. I've been calling this "the nub," a word Merriam-Webster defines as "the main part or point of something." Other dictionaries call it "the crux."

[00:00:45] As I said, nubs are hard, whether they're in a standard news article or in a stand-alone explainer, but if you work at them, your readers will benefit and you and your colleagues will benefit the next time that nub comes up in your copy or in theirs, because you've already done the work once. Also getting good at dealing with nubs who make your writing better in general. We're going to look at how to deal with this task by breaking it down into stages. They are recognized, research, think, write and tighten and check.

[00:01:29] Let's start with Recognize. We start with recognize because the first step and explaining something that's hard to explain is in recognizing that it's something that needs explaining. In some ways, this is like the listener we've talked about in the last video where you look over a draft you've written or an outline and identify what things a reader might have trouble with. But it's a little different. With a nub, you're talking about something so important that readers might misunderstand the whole subject if they don't have a grasp of this.

[00:02:10] Sometimes what the nub is can be pretty obvious. In an article about a scientific experiment on nuclear fusion, like the one Ken Chang covered. The nub is, not surprisingly, how the experiment works. Think of it this way: if you're explaining something you're covering at a dinner party, what's the thing that leads you to make a digression to explain that particular angle? Because you know that's what the people, you're talking to will ask about or because that's what they need to understand, to understand what you're going to talk about next.

[00:02:50] Or think of what you might hear people say at a party about a subject you know well. Is there something they're getting wrong that's key to the topic? Or try talking about the subject with a friend or relative. What do you stumble over in that description? Or what makes them say, Wait, go back. Can we go over that part again?

[00:03:16] Moving on to research. We've said it before in this class and we'll say it again. It's hard to help people understand something that you don't understand well yourself. Sometimes we're asked to write explainers on things we know. Well, that's great, but sometimes we're asked to write stuff on things we're less familiar with or we're asked not because we know anything about it, but because somebody has to do it and we're available. Hey, it's good to be honest about how life and newsrooms work, right?

[00:03:52] It's generally useful to start with the clips, the coverage that you or your newsroom colleagues or other outlets have done on a subject. But since we're being frank, let's acknowledge this fact. Not everything that's printed or posted online is true or accurate or all that well done. When it comes to your newsroom, you probably have some sense of how solid the published material is. If time is super short, you may have to rely on the clips. That's just the way life is. But if you do read those articles critically, and if you don't seek out other sources of expertise, whether through phone calls to academics, conversations with colleagues, with more experience on the subject and reading other coverage and primary material like reports.

[00:04:48] Here are a couple of search tips. Wikipedia is not a good direct source of information. You don't want to rely on what you find there. A lot of the information is very good, but it's hard to tell which of the information is good. It is, however, an excellent place to find links to good resources. Look at the list of external links at the bottom of both pages and at the sources, the footnotes that are backing up the article.

[00:05:21] On Google, you can have a search return content only from a specific site by using site colon and then the name of the site. Look at sites or product brands known for high quality explainers like quick tanks or The Upshot of the New York Times or Vox.com. And JournalistsResource.org is a Harvard affiliated site that organizes academic research in a way that's easy for journalists to find and use.

[00:05:58] Thinking. Thinking is always hard. But once you're pretty sure you have a good or at least a basic understanding under your belt, it's time to think about different ways to describe what you know or what you've learned. Let's look at three approaches that can help: say what something is by saying what it isn't a negative definition analogy or similes and visual imagery. For an example of the first, let's look at one of Ken Chang's articles on nuclear fusion. In his description of what fusion is, he starts by describing something it isn't, which makes it easier for him to then make a positive definition, that is to say what it is. Fusion isn't splitting atoms, it's combining them. Taking one possibility off the table makes the alternative clearer.

[00:07:02] No analogies and similes. We use analogies and similes all the time. There as ubiquitous as well as ants at a picnic, to use a simile. They both involve comparing two things that are not identical, but have similarity in some aspect that helps cast light on their nature. They're very helpful in explainers because they help readers understand this complicated thing in terms of that thing they already understand.

[00:07:37] Take a story that ran at the height of the financial turmoil caused by the onset of the COVID pandemic in early 2020. Even by the standards of Bloomberg News, this was a doozy. A story about how the market's downturn was forcing investors to sell off certain kinds of bonds, thereby driving market values even lower. At the heart of the problem was something called repo, which is short for repurchase agreements, which investors have been using to increase the amount of money they could borrow to make their bets. That's a lot. But we're going to have to explain repo because you can't explain the rest of it without it. You know, and that's something even though a lot of Wall Street professionals would have a hard time getting their mind around or getting clear enough in their mind to be able to tell their mother or brother or a friend about it.

[00:08:35] Here's how one financial organization described it. I don't know about you, but this makes my head hurt. So, the reporter in the article we're talking about decided to take a step back and describe repo using an analogy. So, comparing repo to a pawn shop doesn't tell me everything I might need to know about repo, but it's a good starting point. It gives me a framework for everything that follows. The tricky part with analogies is that it's easy to come up with analogies that sound good but aren't quite right if you really think about them. That's especially true because of how handy they are and how long they can stick in people's minds.

[00:09:32] For instance, Uruguay was called the Switzerland of Latin America in a New York Times article in 1951. And a Google search turns up dozens of recent articles still using the phrase. Is it accurate now? Was it accurate then? I certainly don't know. But I bet

a lot of Uruguayans might think that analogy obscures more than it illuminate about their country.

[00:10:04] Another thing you can use is visual imagery. It can also help shed light on a complicated subject. This is why graphics, for instance, can be such a powerful tool. But it works with words too. Let's look again at Ken's article on the fusion experiment. So, let's see. We have 192 lasers, a cylinder the size of a pencil eraser or frozen nubbin of hydrogen encased in diamond, a bee sized fuel pellet. That's a lot of very specific visual imagery.

[00:10:46] Well, let's talk about writing and tightening. We probably all know the old saying, "I'm sorry this is so long, I didn't have time to write it shorter." Remember that analogy we looked at a few minutes ago. So, one sentence line, comparing the repo market to a pawnbroker show. Here's how that read in an earlier draft. The need to write tightly is especially true at the beginning of an article. You can't say everything at once. You can't explain everything in the first paragraph or two. If you give readers a clue in a sense that a longer explanation is coming, you can be pretty brief up top.

[00:11:35] Checking. The last step, as it so often is in journalism, is checking your work for accuracy. This is just as important for a work of explanation as it is for an investigative piece. But the process can be a little different than, say, making sure you've gotten everybody's middle initial correct. The biggest variable is your state of knowledge. Maybe you've been covering something for years, but even written some of the explanatory material previously, as can have done with earlier rounds of fusion experiments. Or maybe you knew next to nothing about the subject before you got handed the assignment of explaining it. We all know what kinds of things can happen on busy news days.

[00:12:26] In either case, you should be looking for somebody who knows the field well to vet your copy. So, look it over and flag anything that looks wrong or misleading. But your responsibility for getting that kind of thorough vetting is much bigger when you know less on your own. Also, every newsroom has different policies on what it's okay to share with outsiders for fact checking or similar reviews. Some limit fact checking to reading quotes back. Some don't do that. Some go further. In general, the less political the subject is, the safer it is to do this. Think nuclear fusion versus a presidential campaign. But make sure you know what the policy is, where you work.

[00:13:14] So those are steps for dealing with a nub. But keep in mind that those are sort of ideal scenarios. In real life, you might not have enough time to dig into a subject or enough space to explain it well. And sometimes, despite our best efforts, we just can't really understand the hard thing we're trying to explain.

[00:13:40] Once I wrote a story for Science Time about an amazingly important phenomenon, the way that evenings get lighter faster than mornings do in the weeks after the winter solstice. I was not an expert in this. I asked a science editor why that was, and he said, why don't you write about it? So, I was starting from zero. So, I talked to a physics reporter who sent me to a very prominent and respected astronomer who. Couldn't explain it to me. And I got the feeling maybe he didn't quite understand it himself. So, he sent me to another professor who tried and tried to explain it to me and finally said, I think to get this you really have to have learned a lot of spherical trigonometry. Things like this happen. What do you do?

[00:14:38] One thing you can do is step back and see if there's a way to describe a broader phenomenon. Another is to make sure you're clear about at least the consequences of the things whose workings you can't quite exactly explain. And if you're working in a medium that lets you dip into the first person, you can be open about the limits of your knowledge. That's what I ended up doing in the astronomy piece. I can't say it's the piece I'm proudest of writing in my life, but it had the virtue of honesty. And you can console yourself with two other thoughts. Reminders of our fallibility are rarely wasted, and the effort you make contributes to the credibility of a journalistic enterprise. We can say we're doing the best we can when we try to do the best we can.

[00:15:37] Next week, we'll be looking at formats that give us more space than standard news articles. So doing our best can be better and deeper. So, it'll still be hard. Thank you for watching and I'll see you in the forums.