

## Why being a journalist is like life with a toddler – thoughts and definitions for explanatory journalism, by John O’Neil

If you spend time with a toddler, your day will be filled with explanations. That’s also true of spending time with grownups, too! We explain and ask for explanations all the time. It’s an essential part of human life – and may even be an essential part of what made us human. It’s certainly a staple of our work as journalists. Reporters are constantly pestering sources not just for facts but for meaning – the understanding we need to make a subject clear to ourselves so we can make it clear to others. The question is, do we give our readers the kind of understanding that we ask our sources to give us – and do we do it often enough and well enough.

One of the first things I was taught as a young reporter was that “There’s no such thing as a stupid question.” That’s something I want you to keep in mind in our discussion forums. It’s also worth remembering whenever we write and edit and think about our readers. And in that sense of starting with the basics, let me lay out some of the concepts and terms we’ll be using in this course. I’m not going to set these up as fully explicated academic definitions, but rather in the rough sense in which they might be used in a working newsroom. I hope I make them clear. If not, let me know in the forums. After all, there’s no such thing as ...!

Two terms we’ll use a lot are **context** and **background**. They’re similar but not the same. Context refers to a fact or set of facts that can make another fact more understandable by identifying its setting: I wasn’t just stuck in a traffic jam, I was stuck in the traffic jam caused by the bridge collapse. Background in this sense means the circumstances that underlie a situation: I was in a traffic jam caused by the collapse of a century-old bridge that hadn’t been repaired ever since my city’s bankruptcy. There’s also **analysis**. That involves not only identifying the factors that have created a situation but making a judgment about their relative importance. In the never-ending debates over objectivity as a value in journalism, some people put analysis on one side of the objective-subjective divide, while others say all writing involves analysis, that nothing is “pure fact.”

We’ll talk a lot about the audience. That’s a simple notion: For working purposes, your audience is those you expect to read or otherwise absorb the content you produce. Having a sense of what to say to them depends on understanding who they are, what they are likely to know and don’t know and what they care about. We all sit down with some notion in our mind of who our audience is, but those assumptions can use careful checking and openness to feedback. After all, explanations can descend into what’s become known as “**mansplaining**” – a form of discourse that condescends to the audience by assuming (and making very clear!) that the writer thinks he’s (and yes, it’s not always a he but sadly more common among us) is much, much smarter than the person being lectured. It’s become known by its common opening phrase: “Actually, ...” Another of the first bits of writing advice I ever got was to assume my reader was smarter than me but not very familiar with the subject being discussed.

We want our explainers to be **authoritative** and **concise**. Authority comes from depth of knowledge of a subject, which includes the points of disagreement within it. Let's be frank: Journalists are not often experts on their subjects, but they can develop expertise, which depends both on a sense of knowing what you don't know, as well as developing sources who can help you fill in gaps as needed. Let's be even franker: We're often asked to write about things we don't know much about. Explaining such subjects is tricky and calls not just for humility and hard work but the ability to step back from details even while absorbing them. Concise is a relative term that depends not only on our audience but the kind of article we're writing and our deadline. Sometimes more is more; more often, a little less is a little better.

To be most useful, explanatory journalism should not only be **understandable** but **accessible**, or **findable**, to use a more Google-friendly phrase. We'll talk about ways to **integrate** it into broader coverage and how that can be helped by making explanatory content **evergreen** (more likely to stay fresh and relevant by steering away from the details of the moment) or **recyclable** (easy to update without major revisions). Creating such **persistent content** increases the odds that you'll be able to provide readers with explanations when they need them. The easiest kind of work to do quickly is work you've already done!

One way to think of what we're aiming for is a term coined by Jay Rosen, a journalism professor at New York University, who in a 2008 [blog post](#) talked about how explanatory journalism could create a "**scaffolding of understanding**." At the time, Rosen, like billions of other people around the world, were trying to make sense of the accelerating collapse of the global financial system. An in-depth explanation provided by an NPR podcast, Planet Money, not only brought him up to speed on the unfolding events but gave him the tools he needed to understand subsequent news stories. We usually think of a sequence in which we first get information and then get an explanation, he wrote. But there's another way in which it helps if understanding precedes information. "There are some stories," he wrote, "where until I grasp the *whole* I am unable to make sense of *any* part."