

## Yes, it's a news story but you can still help your readers! | Module 2

[00:00:12] Hi, and welcome to Module Two of Explain This! our course on explanatory journalism. I hope you enjoyed our first week. Now we're moving into the part of the course where we're headed to more specifics, and I'm looking forward to hearing your thoughts in the online forum. Here's what we'll cover in this video, the first of two for me for this module.

[00:00:37] We'll start by recognizing the constraints often found in news writing: a lack of time and a lack of space. But we'll go on to talk about different approaches to dealing with those pressures and finish by talking about what parts of standard news stories might be most in need of an explanatory eye.

[00:00:59] In the first of this week's readings, I started by referencing scenes in old movies about newspapers. Well, this here's where reporters who are covering a big fire or a court verdict run to the phone and all in the news. They show, sweetheart, can we rewrite? They dictate the latest developments and then hang up to go round and cover more news or head to the bar. The job there is just to get the facts and to get them as quickly as possible. So, the editor is putting the paper together. If the news was big enough, somebody would shout that other classic line. "Stop the presses!" Things are like that anymore. For one thing, there are many presses left to stop and no telephone operators to call sweetheart. But the pressure to break news and get it to readers quickly is, if anything, more intense than ever before.

[00:02:01] So the question is, can we do it in a way in which we provide readers with the background and context they need to understand this news? When it comes to the very fastest formats that news organizations rely on, like alerts, tweets and live blogging. The answer is, well, to be honest, it's mostly no. When speed matters more than everything else except the accuracy, speed wins, which means brevity, there's not a lot of room for context in "Titanic Sinks" or "Man Lands on Moon." But the good news is that most news doesn't move quite that fast. And since there aren't presses to stop anymore, we can help readers out either by taking a little time before filing or by revising the pieces that had to be published too quickly to fill out the first time.

[00:03:02] I'm going to describe two methods for doing this called one, "write and fix" and the other, "frame it first." So pretty much what they sound like and what approach. You just write your story without stopping to ponder too deeply over what explanatory material would help readers and then look it over for the kinds of holes and pitfalls that are likely to cause problems in the second. You take some time before writing to think about what would need explanation and to set up an outline that gives you space and reminds you to deal with it. In both cases, you're looking for the same things. Do you see any of these?

[00:03:49] For instance, jargon or other key terms that are used in a way that many readers won't understand. Does the story have enough background to the latest news, the role for people who missed the last few stories? Is there sufficient identification of the key people in the story, including a sense of their significance or political leanings and of key points of view or arguments? And is there a summary of why the news matters? Let's look at each of these briefly.

[00:04:23] We're all familiar with jargon. We all use it all the time because it works as a shorthand. This slide shows a random handful of terms you might see in stories written around now. Again, the question of audience is crucial. Some readers might know all these

terms and some might know none. If a term is important and you think your readers might not be sure what it is, either find another way to say it or explain what the jargon means. Target is especially dangerous on subjects where you are especially knowledgeable. If you find yourself using a lot of it, check to make sure you're not going too deep into the weeds, which is jargon for going into too much detail. As we said before, about the desert island, you don't have to explain everything, but you should keep in mind the readers don't come to a story with the same context and knowledge that you or your editors or your sources to help catch them up.

[00:05:32] If you mention or quote somebody, the readers should know who they are. If you're sure that a person is super well-known like your head of state or somebody even more important like Beyonce, say it's fine to skip it, but pretty much everybody else should be identified. And if a story describes a conflict, as most do, you should spell out what political parties or other groups are involved. That's important for fairness as well as clarity. It reminds you to represent all points of view. Summaries are sometimes called Nut Grafts meaning the "nut" paragraph. The spot where you stop and say, "This is the story in a nutshell."

[00:06:22] So think about these items. You can write them up as a list as you're making an outline, or if you're doing right and fix, you can find the items in your first draft. Right and fix is certainly faster if you're really pressed for time. It's probably better to write the article first and improve it later so you don't get caught with a brilliant but half-finished piece.

[00:06:47] But the frame it first approach has several advantages. One is that making a checklist of possible pitfalls gives you a chance to write around them in the first place. It can be better and easier to avoid jargon than to explain it. Another is that you can create a structure in which you leave a place for places to concentrate the background or context, rather than trying to squeeze it in wherever you wrote it in a first draft.

[00:07:19] So how do you get to work? Here are some steps to get you going. That list you just made gives you a sense of what you need to explain in that news story. So go through its item by item and make sure you understand each of them. Then ask yourself, Do I really understand this one or that one well enough to be able to explain them? If you're not sure. So, you've got work to do. One place to start, and this is the fastest method, is to look at what your news organization has already published on the subject, including your own work.

[00:08:00] It's easy to forget that you may have explained something in the 20th paragraph of the story of that ran two years ago. What one of our guest speakers, Kim Chang calls self-plagiarism is perfectly acceptable. Borrowing from pieces written by colleagues can usually be okay too. But check out the newsroom's policies or the newsroom's unwritten code of conduct. Otherwise treat this like any other reporting task: find smart people and or authoritative written sources.

[00:08:36] Once you're clear on what you want to say comes the question of where and how you want to say it. Can this thing or that thing be explained in a parenthetical phrase, a sentence? Or does it need a whole paragraph? Let's look at how the different options for short, medium and longer in search work in the context of one story.

[00:09:01] This is a New York Times article about the impact that Russia's war on Ukraine has had on the world's food supply. Full disclosure, I've taken slightly with some warnings to make examples more concise. Let's look at the lead or opening paragraph. I've fired two

phrases in bold. Clearly the Bosphorus is an important term in this story, but calling it "a narrow strait" probably doesn't add that much information for a reader who doesn't already know what it is.

[00:09:36] So here's an example of what you can do with just a parenthetical phrase to add explanatory information. Yes, it's true that saying that the Bosphorus connects the Black Sea and wider waters doesn't answer every question about it. And it does assume that the reader knows that Ukraine has parts of the Black Sea. But those seven words are probably pretty helpful for a lot of people.

[00:10:04] In this passage, I flagged in bold two things that might be worth explaining here. Within the flow of the story, that is, what's the crisis and why is fertilizer relevant? These got addressed not by phrases but by separate sentences. The first gives a broader context for the food issues caused by the war. The second spells out why Russia's decision to cut back on fertilizer exports is important. The final option is what I call the trunk.

[00:10:39] When you insert a separate full paragraph or even a set of paragraphs into a news story to give necessary background or context, this usually happens lower down in the article after the key news has been addressed. Sometimes you can be quite flexible about where these sections go, because really you just want to know that they get included someplace. For instance, here's one section in the middle of this piece. Those paragraphs give a sense of the size and scope of the current problem. But is there something else to say that would be useful?

[00:11:20] Yes, there is. In fact, there are three important points the author wants to make here that created a strain in the food supply besides the war, the pandemic's disruptions. Droughts and the way the rise in the dollar's value has decreased purchasing power in many poorer nations.

[00:11:45] So to sum up, including explanatory material and standard news stories is hard but can be done. How do you do it? Partly depends on how much time and space you have, but doing it well depends on: being aware of what points could benefit from explanation, whether it's jargon, key people or points of view or complicated concepts. It depends on doing the work ahead of time to make sure you understand those terms well enough to be able to explain them. Whether that means digging through the newsroom's past coverage or doing more reporting.

[00:12:26] And it means choosing your mom, your options according to what works best for different kinds of information and different places in the story. Remember, you can't put everything at the top. That's why thinking about story structure while you're thinking about what you're explaining can be so helpful.

[00:12:46] Thanks for watching the next video, we'll look at how to handle the kind of point that's both crucial for understanding a story and really hard to explain. It's what I call the stories "nub." Get ready and I'll see you in the forums.