

Journalism 101: Sports Writing (9)

- School newspapers seldom need to worry about having enough sports news to report. The challenge is to publish high quality sportswriting. To do so, reporters and other writers have to guard against preparing stories that consist largely of dead facts and statistics with a few observations thrown in.
- Daily newspapers have an advantage over school papers when covering completed events, because scores and results may still be fresh news after 24 hours.
- When the results of a sports event are two or three weeks old – as they often are when they appear in a school paper- they are virtually dead. This unavoidable condition of reporting for a school paper only makes clearer the need for imagination and sound sports reporting practices.
- Most of the articles we will write for the sports section will have a feature-like tone to them. We will not be reporting breaking news here; articles will take aspects of sporting events and report them in depth, or they will summarize and report on weeks of a sport's season.

Types of sports stories most likely to be used by us:

1. **Summary story:** It is a sports story, usually in scholastic publications, that combines the coverage of two or more games into a story that also includes preview for a contest on or near the paper's release date.
2. **Sports Features:** Feature stories are in depth stories focusing on a sport event or athlete in the school. Remember especially sports students participate in that are non-school related such as fishing, hunting, skiing, skating, hiking, and other such activities can provide a nice contrast with stories covering major team sports. Some of these features might center on individuals who participate in these activities. Feature stories spotlighting star athletes, coaches, and alumni doing well in college or professional sports can also be covered here.
3. **Columns:** A column is a sports opinion piece; it adds life to the section. Columnists interpret situations (rule changes, league predictions, hirings, firings) or simply comment on concerns. The column should be regular, labeled and written by evenhanded students.
Writing a column is the same as writing a commentary, except it is about sports. See the handout on column writing for more on writing good columns.
4. **Briefs:** These are blurbs about non-revenue or so-called minor sports (they cannot support themselves financially). They can also include reserve and freshman squad information as well as directions to game sites, quick stories concerning new records or coaching changes.
5. **Advance stories:** A news story, it tells readers what to expect at a game, during a series or during a year (seasonal previews). Can be relaxed and should include: coaches' quotes, player stats, injury reports, significance of the game.



6. **Sports news stories:** These stories are exactly as they sound. . .they report some news event in a sports related field. An example would be the firing of a coach. . .it's not a game story or a column, but a news event that involves sports.

Writing a Sports Story

- **Reporting:** I may be beating a dead horse, but good sports writing starts with good reporting. If you are writing about a particular sport, it's your job to learn as much as possible about that team. This means getting a hold of the coach to see what is happening in the sport, attending practices and games to look for stories to write about, interviewing players, and generally getting to know what this group of people is all about. It isn't a matter of just interviewing a few of the players and getting a sense of what is happening. As with other types of stories, reporting is key to your success. Spend some time with the group looking for the heart of what that team is going through.
- **Story structures:** As with the other sections, sports stories should be written primarily in the diamond story format. This means looking for an anecdotal lead to start the story, which usually comes from observing the team in action and looking for some smaller story that summarizes what the team is going through, or what the story is all about.
- **Write sports stories as you would write a feature:** Diamond story format, good details, real in depth reporting, observation. What you are doing here is summarizing what is happening with a particular team. Again, this isn't just talking to a few members of the team and rehashing facts that everyone knows. When a football player reads the story about the football team, I want him to be really surprised by the knowledge shown by the writer of the article. This takes legwork and good reporting, but it definitely is possible and well done if done correctly.

Tips for sportswriting

1. **Avoid Jargon and Clichés:**

- Jargon is highly specialized language used by those in the same work of profession.
- A cliché is a trite word or expression-one that has lost its freshness and expressive power from repeated use.

2. **Follow the conventions of sportswriting:**

- Sportswriting style usually involved certain details that may be slightly different from the details of other newswriting forms. These include proper names, team references, and the use of standings, records, box scores and other statistical material.

3. **Interpret the Facts Only If you are Qualified:**

- Opinions on the facts of a sports event may appear occasionally in basic sports stories. The heated nature of sports events lends itself readily to the statement of opinions. Still, if there is to be opinion, it needs to be backed up in two ways-by your thorough knowledge of the sport itself and by the facts of the event you are writing about.

4. **Find a creative angle/a common emphasis**

- The "report em as they play em" strategy for sports writing is a recipe for disaster. No one waits two or three weeks for the paper to arrive to learn whether the team won or lost. And it serves no purpose to rehash the play of each game. Instead, build the story around the common elements-threads of continuity-in each game.

- For example, in each game, the weather played a role. Or in successive games, the team lost key players to injuries. Or in game after game, the team staged a late rally to win.
- By finding common elements and then using direct quotes to explain them, you can write informative and entertaining stories. But no one-not even the players themselves-will read a story that recaps the season, game by game, play by play. They may scan it for their names. But they won't read it. Get the story behind the team, the human element, the thing that makes the members of the team play the sport, and you've got yourself a story. Retelling statistics and facts just doesn't cut it.