

ZENGER

The Twelve Commandments for Reporting the News

1. Zenger breaks news. Recycling a previously reported quote from another outlet is unacceptable unless the quote itself is at the center of the story. Even then, a reporter must independently verify the quote. Contact your sources directly. Always obtain original material.
2. Stick to facts. Do not offer your opinion. Never write news in the first person, with words like “I” and “we.” You are a referee who impartially calls the game, not a player or a fan. Do not write that A caused B. Instead quote a source saying he believes A caused B. Or simply write that A happened, and then B happened.
3. Ledes should be short and powerful; their purpose is to reveal what is new and interesting; they should be memorable and colorful whenever possible. In the digital age you have no more than 17 words to seize a reader’s attention. Don’t waste them.
4. Quote first, attribute second. (Bad: Mr. Smith said, “Let’s go.” Good: “Let’s go,” said Mr. Smith.) Similarly, don’t name your sources at the beginning of a sentence. (Bad: According to the Department of Energy, “water freezes at 32 degrees.” Good: “Water freezes at 32 degrees,” according to an Energy Department report.)
5. Never begin a sentence with “According to.” Tell readers the source of every piece of information in your story, but that phrase belongs only in the middle or at the end of a sentence.
6. Always write “said.” Never substitute “added,” “replied,” “contended,” “continued” or anything else other than “said.”
7. Get rid of surplus words, especially adjectives. Comb through your copy to eliminate anything unnecessary, redundant, opinionated or excessive. Pretend someone offered you \$5 for every word you erase; keep the ones that are worth more than money.
8. Don’t start a sentence with a time, a date, a year, a month, a day of the week or other similar constructions. Those generally belong in the middle or at the end of a sentence.
9. Do everything you can to avoid using or referring to politically partisan media outlets, blogs, newscasts, radio hosts or similarly slanted sources. News stories should only rely on objective sources.
10. Avoid using adverbs; use adjectives sparingly. Never use adjectives to label the arguments of people on one side of a debate. (Do not refer to “the liberal Brookings Institution” or “the conservative Heritage Foundation.”)
11. Never write “for example.” If something is clearly an example, adding those two words is redundant. If it isn’t, you have a larger problem that the words “for example” won’t fix.
12. When in doubt, consult the Associated Press Stylebook. If the AP is silent on a subject, refer to “The Bloomberg Way,” the financial wire service’s style guide. If neither speaks to your question, ask an editor or “write around” the problem.