

**IMPROVING YOUR WORK AS  
A FREELANCE JOURNALIST**

# ORATO WORLD MEDIA

**True Stories. Real People.**



# FOREWORD

This short guide, prepared by Orato World Media's editorial team, seeks to provide freelance journalists with a quick reference guide to answer common questions, provide general insight on how to improve your copy, act as a primer for American Press style, and aid in your ability to capture a natural environmental portrait of your subject.

Many of the tips in this guide relate directly to work produced for Orato World Media; however, the general principles of the information provided can aid in one's ability to write for any journalistic purpose or publication.

This guide was prepared as an aid to your previous journalistic experience and does not claim or seek to be a replacement for accredited journalism training. Writers seeking more information about journalism programming should consult their local places of education.

Reading and studying this guide is not a prerequisite to write for Orato. We simply hope you find the information included in this guide useful in your working relationship with Orato World Media.

# Part 1: Structure and Voice

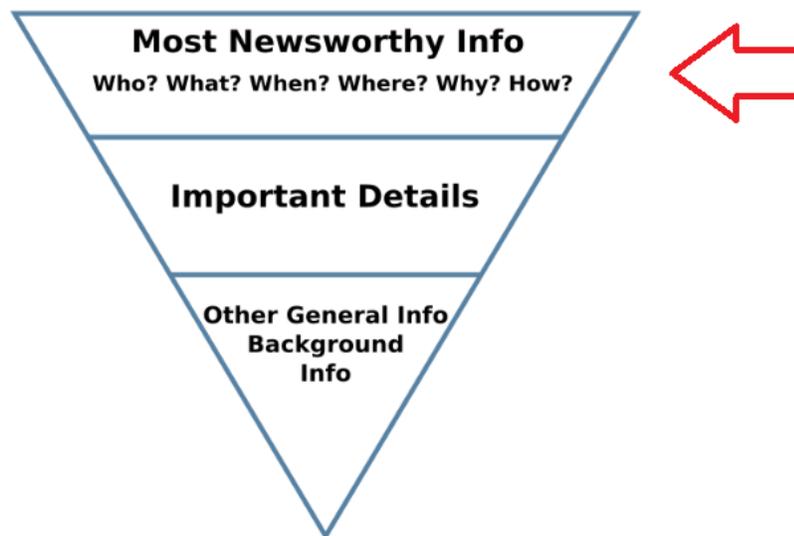
## Inverted pyramid and how it applies to first-person narratives

The words inverted pyramid likely invoke memories of white-haired and mustachioed journalism instructors preaching the meat and potatoes approach to content delivery.

For those who may not have the same vivid response to the words inverted pyramid, or for those who perhaps haven't come across this age-old journalism metaphor, allow me to break it down for you.

In traditional news reporting, the story begins with the lede. This single sentence of no more than 25 words should convey the critical information of the story. It acts as an entry point to the story. For the reader, it should feel like diving into the deep end of a pool: you digest the important information fast, and if the subject or hook interests you, then you continue to scroll, or you move on with the minimum amount of information necessary to form the basis of an understanding.

That lede, news jargon for lead, is the base of your story. It's the foundation of a towering pyramid, although unlike the resting place of pharaohs, this base sits at the very top of our proverbial story pyramid. As the name suggests, the story then narrows into the background and supporting facts, quotes, etc., before ending on a sentence that, while providing value, is not essential to understand the story.



The inverted pyramid isn't necessarily chronological, and it doesn't leave room for flowery language. It's quick. It's to the point. It is easy to digest. But it's flawed.

Contrast the inverted pyramid with traditional memoir writing, which starts at the beginning and travels the long and winding road to its eventual conclusion. Discoveries occur along the way, and the end of the story should provide insight into our own lives and leave us questioning our assumptions.

It's a style that lends itself to long-form content—the type of story that has a cover page and an author bio and testimonials. What it doesn't accommodate is short, 500 to 2,000-word stories surrounding a specific event or experience.

So, if neither the inverted pyramid nor memoir-style fit, how do we tackle first-person narratives in a journalistic fashion? By combining the two.

In the digital age of content, we don't have the time to follow a story chronologically or write four chapters about the subject's time in college, we have to follow the inverted pyramid's lede structure.

Let's look at an example.

"I contracted polio at the age of one when doctors gave me my first vaccine. About one in 2 million doses fail, and I got that one."

Now compare that lede to this:

"Polio took away my ability to walk without crutches when I was just a year old. But it didn't stop me from doing something that would have seemed impossible to me decades ago: climbing the Himalayas."

The first sentence is an example of starting at the beginning. While it's important information to note, it's not strong enough to compete with the myriad of other content, apps, and notifications vying for our reader's attention.

[The second example, on the other hand, dives right into the story. It tells the reader what to expect from this piece without giving away the sense of adventure and excitement that can be found within a well-written first-person story.](#) Does it break the traditional rules of a lede? Yes, but that's OK. It holds to the same principles of the inverted pyramid structure, only told through a new and exciting lens.

OK, we're past the lede, now what?

This is where the water becomes murky. There is no right or wrong path.

In many cases, such as the story mentioned above, it makes sense to follow the events chronologically. Where this differs from memoir writing, however, is the speed with which we pass through events. We simply don't have the time or luxury to say everything. Instead, we apply the principles of the inverted pyramid, add color and description, and move on.

[Other stories, such as this short piece about the vaccination of an ICU doctor, may not need that tight chronological order to follow the first-person narrative.](#)

At the end of the day, if chronological beyond the lede feels right, it's right, and if it doesn't, it doesn't.

Keep the ideologies of the inverted pyramid in mind, but allow the story to speak for itself.

## Active vs. Passive Voice

Writing in the passive voice is one of the easiest mistakes to make as a journalist. But writing in passive voice, while not incorrect, feels distant from the topic.

Active sentences are direct. They're fast, impactful, and easy to digest. And they're easy to learn.

In the active voice, the subject performs the action described by the verb.

Think of the basic sentence structure of subject, verb, object.

"Cats love twine."

The subject (cats) performs the action (love) with regard to the object (twine).

Passive voice, by contrast, is flipped.

"Twine is loved by cats."

Both are correct, but an active voice is impactful. In a first-person narrative, active voice has the reader experience the event in the subject's shoes as opposed to watching from the passive voice sidelines.

Sometimes you will need to write in a passive voice. And that's OK. The best practice is to limit passive voice and keep your text active whenever possible.

## Finding the nugget

We've talked about the inverted pyramid and descriptive writing, but that only takes us so far. The most important piece of this first-person narrative puzzle is understanding where the heart of our story truly lies.

There is no right or wrong answer, and more often than not the interview will either crystallize or shatter our preconceived perceptions about why this story matters.

But there are general rules of thumb that can help us identify what makes a story unique.

### **What's the bigger picture?**

Before we zero in on the angle or nugget of our story, we must first understand the greater context or theme of the piece. [Take this story from the Orato archives, for example.](#)

"My fellow students at Trisakti University get excited when talking about the reform movement in Indonesia. They have daily discussions about the political role of the military, President Habibie's credibility, Suha's cronies, and how to move against them.

"I have little knowledge about those issues and frankly speaking, I am not really concerned. I am a poor man.

"My parents lead a very simple life and work hard to make ends meet — my father is a driver in a construction company — so my main concern is to finish my studies and get a job."

Only by understanding the bigger picture about what was happening in Indonesia at this point in history can we truly find where our subject fits into this event.

### **How is my subject involved?**

In the case of Wiwid Pratiwo and the Jakarta riots, the subject was one of a presumed many forced to spy for the government. We start by learning that the subject has little interest in politics and comes from a poor family.

His circumstances led to his forced recruitment as a spy on the university and its student body.

### **Why is my subject's story unique and why does it matter?**

Practically speaking, most Indonesian university students were not government spies. Pratiwo's story is different because of the coercion he faced, his fear for his family, and the reader's ability to feel the desperation Pratiwo likely felt as the events unfolded around him.

His story matters because it illustrates the bigger picture we uncovered earlier.

### **So what's the nugget?**

Everything that we just discussed, the background information, our subject's involvement, and his unique perspective, are boiled down into one paragraph that happens near the top of the story:

"He stared at me while he talked about my parents and my younger sisters. The man knew everything about my family, including the workplace of my father and the school of my younger sister. He said that my parents, my sisters, all my family members, and I would have problems if I refused to cooperate. If you knew how the military treats people or groups they see as problems, you would have no option but to sign the form. So I did."

That's the nugget. That's the paragraph that tells the reader everything.

## Descriptive writing

Writing descriptive sentences in traditional hard news prose is difficult.

And while it remains challenging to craft a compelling and descriptive story in Orato's signature first-person style, that is how you, the writer, stand out from the crowd.

Our format not only allows us to go deeper into breaking news but encourages us to do so. We have the time and space to step into the subject's shoes and share their experience.

Let's use this scenario as an example:

"It was dark. I was alone on the edge of a cliff."

Is it interesting? Absolutely. Would I still read it? Probably. Now contrast that sentence with the description below.

"What I remember is that, suddenly, I was completely in the dark. I quickly realized that my flashlight had lost its batteries. I was in a crouched position and felt like I was sitting on a narrow surface. Behind me, I touched the wall of the mountain, and my legs dangled in emptiness."

They share the same premise, but I know which story I'd read.

Don't be afraid to take the time to describe the subject's surroundings. Your story will only be better for it.

## Event-based narratives

We always accept compelling first-person story pitches provided the narrative is event-based. Consider this example, if you will: Jeff doesn't like dogs.

Is it relatable? To some people, it is. But is it a story? Sorry, Jeff. You're probably a great guy, but I have 200 other notifications on my cell phone right now that are more pressing than a story about you not liking dogs.

But what if the story isn't about the fact that Jeff doesn't like dogs? What if it's about the crystallizing moment in his life when Becky's chihuahua bit his big toe and cost him the W in his football match the next afternoon? What if that's what brewed this ever-burning hatred-meets-fear potion that Jeff sips every night before bed?

That story is profoundly more compelling. The meat and potatoes of the story are the same, but the sauce in which it's served adds flavor.

# Part 2: Get Started with AP Style

The Associated Press Style Guide is the holy grail of American journalism style, spelling, and grammar. While we certainly recommend that you pick up and consult your own copy of the AP Style Guide, we've outlined a few key points of consideration when writing for Orato World Media.

## Accented characters

Contrary to popular belief, accented characters are encouraged when writing names, in commonly-used phrases, or directly quoting a language in English. For example, when referring to the weather pattern El Niño, you should use the accented n as opposed to writing El Nino. The same rule holds true for subject names, places, and slang that provides value to the copy regardless of the language in which it's published.

## Titles

The rules for titles can become confusing. However, as a general rule of thumb, capitalize titles when the title precedes the person's name (President Joe Biden) and use lowercase characters when referring to the title separate from the person who holds it (The president said).

Only the following titles should be abbreviated: Dr., Gov., Lt. Gov., Rep., Sen., and titles denoting military rank. Similar to capitalization rules, these titles should only be abbreviated when directly preceding a name.

## Dates and time

Specific dates should be written as such: Jan. 26, 2021. If we are referring to the month alone and not a specific date, write January 2021. March, April, May, June, and July should always be written out, while all other months are abbreviated to the first three letters followed by a period: Jan., Feb., Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov., Dec.

Times should be written using the 12-hour clock and using a.m. or p.m. For example, it's 3 p.m., or it's 3:30 p.m. To avoid confusion, write 12 noon or 12 midnight.

## Placelines

Always include a placeline in your story. The placeline indicates where the events depicted in the story occurred. For example, a story about an Argentine football player in Buenos Aires would begin: BUENOS AIRES, Argentina—

## Spelling

Please use American spelling in all instances. For example, you would write color, not colour.

## Numerals

In general, write out numbers one through nine, and use numerals for 10 and above. Like all AP rules, there are exceptions.

Write out any number if it's the first word of a sentence. For example: Thousands died when Mount Vesuvius erupted.

Use figures when referring to units of measurement, such as 6-foot-5, or scores in a game.

## Hyphenation

There is no right or wrong use of hyphenation in AP style. However, as a general rule of thumb, avoid using too many.

If adding a hyphen improves clarity in the text, use it. If it has little impact, don't use it. And, if you have too many hyphens, consider rewriting the text.

For example, you would write merry-go-round to avoid confusion about what Merry is going around. You would also hyphenate someone's age: Merry is 12-years-old.

## Commas

Like hyphens, use commas and other punctuation marks to improve clarity. If the sentence does not require a comma, do not use one.

Commas are used to separate items in a list, to separate a dependent clause from an independent clause, and isolate interjections from speech.

### Examples:

I want to buy rice, beans, and bread. (list)

Oh, I didn't know I already had rice. (Interjection)

As press freedom comes under fire, journalists like Maria Ressa exemplify the fight for the truth. (DC, IC)

Journalists like Maria Ressa exemplify the fight for the truth as press freedom comes under fire. (IC DC).

## Part 3: Minutiae

We find ourselves at an ever-evolving point in journalism. The need to adapt is, in many ways, forced and fuelled by the internet and social media. Whether we like it or not, social platforms have become ingrained in our society and our field.

Countless journalists and organizations are working to distance themselves from the pressure and power of social media. But the fact remains: social media is here to stay.

So how do we as journalists cope with the digital age? If only it was as simple as following the text of a freelance guide.

We may not have all the answers, but we do have the tools at our disposal to ensure that our reporting is fair and accurate. These are some of those tools.

## Verifying facts using the Internet

We live in the age of information. Everything you could possibly want to know is available and ready for consumption. Only, it's lost in a sea of disinformation.

So how do you separate fact from fiction?

It's easy to do and fuelled by a resource you likely already use: Google.

Beyond Google's handy Fact Check tool—which works wonders for verifying specific claims—simply using Google's search functionality in a meaningful way will yield the best results.

For example, if you're looking for a news story about Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and Senator Bato dela Rosa, instead of simply searching their names, type:

NEWS: Duterte AND Bato

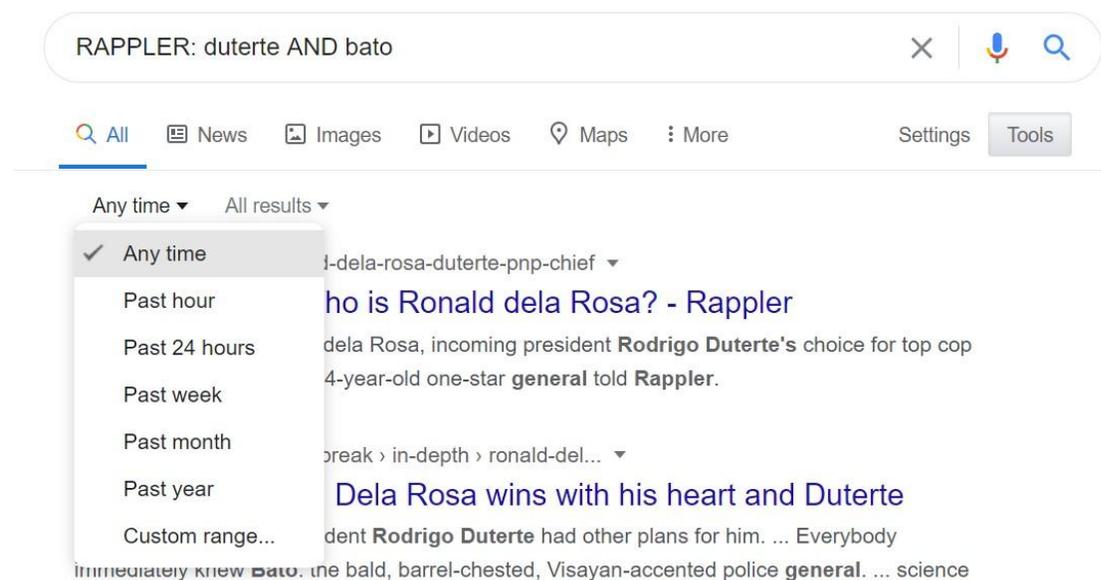
This search will show you any news article in which Duterte and Bato are both mentioned.

Alternatively, if you're looking for a story from a specific source, you could search:

RAPPLER: Duterte AND Bato

This search will only yield results on Rappler stories that name both Duterte and Bato.

You can also use Google's built-in tools to filter your results based on when the page was published.



Google has one final tool that can help journalists verify information: Scholar. Using Google Scholar, you can search a database of verified articles from schools, reputable organizations, governments, case law, and more. Articles are sortable by the number of versions and times the piece has been cited to allow you to analyze the veracity of the content.

These are only a taste of the digital tools available. We hope that these tips aid in your ability to verify the claims of your subject.

## Editing your work

Editing your own work is difficult. Even Hemingway needed an editor.

However, the ability to review your work constructively not only improves your copy but your ability to build a healthy working relationship with editors. Trust us, the last thing any editor wants to see is a powerful piece sent for a rewrite, or worse yet killed because the journalist failed to review their work before sending it to the publication.

Everyone will differ on this front, but this is the methodology we find most useful.

1. After penning the final sentence of your story, take a break. Spend at least 20 minutes, if not longer, on another task before you return to edit your work. You want the article to feel fresh to avoid skipping any words, sentences, or paragraphs.
2. Read through the piece in its entirety before you bring out the proverbial red pen. You need to understand the context before you begin to make any changes, even semantic ones.
3. Now reread each paragraph before marking the text. Make your changes, and read it again. You want to ensure that the meaning isn't lost before you move on to the next section.
4. You've gone through each paragraph, read every single word, and reread it again. Now, read the piece again. Does it still make sense? Does it flow?
5. If you answered yes to the above questions, run your story through your favorite spell-checker. You can use the built-in functionality in Microsoft Word or any program that works for you. However, we recommend Grammarly. You can sign up for a free account online that not only checks your spelling but your grammar as well. The free version is sufficient for this purpose.
6. Congratulations, you've reread your story at least twice, made the necessary edits, and ran a final check using your preferred software. Now it's time to send the story to your editor.

It's important to note that just because you took the time to edit the story doesn't mean the editor won't make any changes or send it back for a rewrite. The purpose of editing your work is to ensure that the stories you send down the editorial pipeline are as clean as they can be so the editor will be happy to see your name on future stories.

# Part 4: Getting the photo

At Orato World Media, our focus is on the power of the written word.

Many journalists, including some of us at Orato, began our careers in newsrooms where the word was emphasized more than the accompanying picture.

While we love words, we understand that, in the digital age, having a compelling photograph to run alongside an article is critical in attracting readers.

Whether you interviewed the subject via phone or a video call, there will be times that you will be forced to accept the photo submission of your story subject. But what about when you have control? How can you ensure you get the best possible image?

The reality is that, when photographing a subject for online media, you don't need the best camera or any high-end equipment. Your cell phone, with some exceptions, is more than capable of capturing an impactful image.

It's the combination of the subject's expression, the moment, the lighting, and the composition that makes a strong photograph, not the gear.

So, with that in mind, here are a few tips and tricks to get strong images to accompany your story.

## Environmental Portraiture

Ask your subject where they want to have their photograph taken, but don't rely entirely on their suggestion. More often than not, the subject is going to recommend a photograph outside, maybe next to a tree or some shrubbery. That's fine, and you should take that photo to build a rapport with your subject, but don't forget to use your inquisitive journalistic nature to find a better location.

One of the best places to photograph someone is in their element. If you're writing a story about an artist, it makes sense to photograph them in the middle of their gallery surrounded by their art. If they work in an office and that is integral to the story, photograph them at their desk. And don't worry about moving items on their desk around or forcing them to clean up—whether it's a coffee stain or chipped paint, it adds to the story conveyed by your image. You want to capture something natural, something relatable.

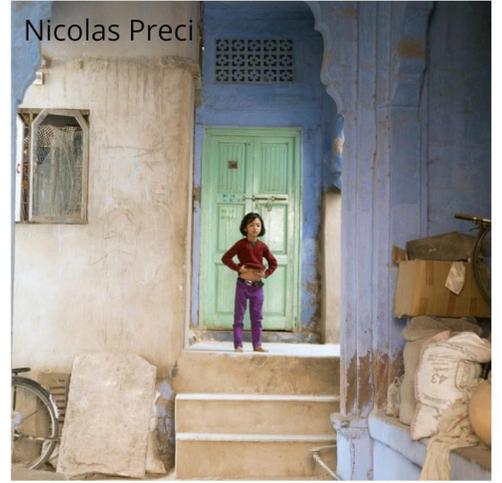
Keit Silale



Parker Crook



Nicolas Preci



Nicolas Preci



## Framing and composition

Don't just put your subject in the middle of the picture. Consider your frame: does it make sense that they're in the middle? It will often look better to place the subject on either the left or right third. This principle is commonly known as the rule of thirds.

Whenever possible, avoid placing your subject directly against the background. You want to leave room for separation in the image. This is part of the reason why some portraits pop and others fall flat.

As a general rule, the angle at which you photograph someone drastically changes how that person is perceived. A photograph taken from the top down can make a subject appear small or weak, while a photograph from below eye level makes them appear strong and confident. More often than not, you should aim to photograph the subject from slightly below eye level. But be careful, the last thing you want is the reader to be staring up the subject's nose.

Ensure that your subject has something to do. Have them rest their hands on the keyboard, or maybe cross their arms. You want the image to appear natural. If they're uncomfortable being photographed, have them look off-camera.

Look for symmetry, white space, unique angles, or leading lines. All of these basic design principles can translate into effective compositions.



# QUESTIONS?

Thank you for taking the time to read and review this document. We hope it provides value to you in your pursuit of telling stories that matter.

Please provide any feedback on this guide to Managing Editor John White, [editor@orato.world](mailto:editor@orato.world), or Newsletter Editor Parker Crook, [newsletter@orato.world](mailto:newsletter@orato.world).