

# NewsLab Report

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## Revise and Conquer

How can you tell your script is done? For many reporters and producers the answer is simple: “By looking at the clock.” The truth is that “finished” scripts are a rarity in TV news; what gets on the air is often nothing more than a draft. That’s because we frequently skip the important step of revising what we have written.

Even in newsrooms with a formal script review process, it’s critical for writers to revise their own work before handing it

to an EP. The writer presumably is in the best position to spot problems and fix them before going into edit. But how to begin?

First, build time for revision into your day. Set yourself an earlier deadline—as little as 15 minutes earlier than usual—and stick to it. Then take a short break before beginning to revise your copy. If you start revising immediately, you may read what you thought you wrote or meant to write, rather than what you actually put on the page.

Next, read all copy out loud, not under your breath. Listen for sentences that are too long, for awkward phrases and double meanings. Replace jargon, “cop-speak,” and “journalese” with more everyday language. One way to spot stilted language is by adding a conversational phrase to the start of each sentence as you read aloud. “Guess what?” seems to do the trick. Hunt down and kill shopworn adjectives (tragic, stunning, and the like) whose only purpose is to tell viewers what to feel. Retain or add specific details instead.

Edit backwards. The last word should be the most powerful. Do you need the last sentence in your story, or the last few words in each sentence? For example, in a story about people being evacuated from their homes, the writer said, “In the end, they simply gave up and made their way

out of the area.” Backwards editing might have resulted in a tighter version: “In the end, they simply gave up and left.”

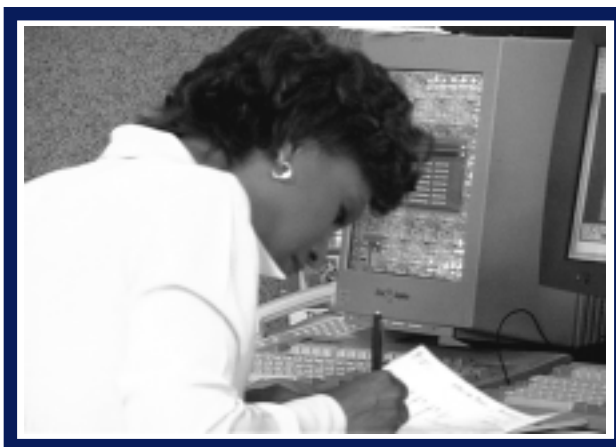
Read closely for accuracy. Check spelling (especially names and lo-

cations in fonts and graphics) and grammar (especially subject-verb agreement and subject-pronoun agreement). Check all numbers and do the math to make sure calculations are correct.

Make sure to use active verbs in the appropriate tense, and look for any use of the passive voice that is not deliberate, which may signal missing information. Saying “Mistakes were made,” for example, doesn’t tell who made them.

Listen to soundbites and natural sound without looking at the video. Make sure the sound is clear and understandable. Look at the video without listening to the sound. Are the pictures telling the story you want to tell? Review what you’ve written in the context of the pictures. Have you merely described what the viewer is seeing, or added meaning to the video?

You may not have time to take all these steps on every story, but try to make time for at least some of them. Your stories—and your viewers—will be the better for it.



## Making It Right

**“There is plenty of room for improvement in the way TV newsrooms deal with on-air mistakes.”**

### References

- Amy Mitchell of the Project for Excellence in Journalism analyzed the results of this survey. Contact her at [asmitch@journalism.org](mailto:asmitch@journalism.org)
- For tips on developing your own corrections policy, see <http://www.newslab.org/correct.htm>
- Results of a separate survey on this topic are available at <http://www.cjr.org/year/99/4/poll.asp>

When mistakes happen on the air—and they will—how many television newsrooms have a clear-cut policy for handling corrections? A NewsLab survey of 220 TV journalists found that only about a third of them work at stations with guidelines covering both the timing and placement of on-air corrections for every kind of error. The survey found that most stations just aren't that specific about what to do when bad information gets on the air.

Two-thirds of the journalists responding to the survey said their stations make on-air corrections, at least some of the time. The trouble is that many of them could discern no formal process for determining when and how to issue a correction. As one respondent wrote, “We...treat each mistake differently.” Another called the station's policy “catch as catch can.” A third respondent said on-air corrections are reserved only for the most serious mistakes. “If it is a major error with possible litigation involved we will run an on-air correction.” But this person added, “In three years I have only seen that happen three times.”

Most stations that do have specific guidelines say they try to correct errors in the same newscast as the mistake was made, if at all possible. “Major errors are corrected immediately on the air, or during the next newscast if it's discovered after the show is completed,” one person wrote. Other newsrooms require more than one correction, in an effort to reach the same audience that heard or saw the mistake. “If a correction is necessary it airs in the same position in the same newscast in which the error occurred,” one respondent explained. Said another, “We try to correct the mistake in that same newscast and place it as high as the original story (we don't bury corrections).”

But fully one out of five respondents said

they work at a station where there either is no corrections policy, or where errors are treated as an internal matter to be handled in a post-mortem meeting or a discrepancy report. “There is no system for tracking script errors and following-up,” one person wrote. “Usually there are conversations between the individuals involved, and promises to do better next time. That's it.” At a different station, the approach was less direct. “Anchors who find errors send the errant script to other anchors and warn them to be aware of the ‘problem’ writer,” one person wrote. Another station's corrections policy was described simply as “indifference.”

Why bother correcting errors? People who worked at stations with clear policies said it's all about maintaining credibility. “You ‘must’ accept responsibility for errors,” one person wrote. “Your viewers respect you more for it...they don't expect you to be perfect.” As another respondent put it, “I strongly believe that acknowledging error makes us stronger, not weaker.”

Yet most stations apparently don't go that far. Instead of acknowledging error by airing a correction, one person said, “more often another story would be done updating what ‘we’re now told.’” Another respondent said errors are treated differently depending on who spots them. “Unless a viewer points it out, usually the newsroom also overlooks it.” That was apparently the case in several newsrooms. As one person said, “Most errors are swept under the rug hoping no viewer calls us on it.”

The survey results suggest there is plenty of room for improvement in the way TV newsrooms deal with on-air mistakes. At a minimum, stations should have a formal policy for dealing with specific kinds of errors, and that policy should be made known to everyone in the newsroom. Mistakes that go uncorrected send a message to viewers that the station is sloppy, at best—or worse, not worthy of their trust.

# Reinventing Online TV News

by Mike Song

What does an online TV story look like? Most of the time, it looks a lot like it did on the air only smaller, with lesser-quality video. There's nothing innovative or interactive about stories that are just streamed onto the Internet. But what if you found a way to give Web users more control over how they experience a story? What if you took a story apart, and let the user put it back together?

That's what NewsLab did with "Married at the Mall," an hour-long documentary by Minnesota filmmaker Melody Gilbert. We laid out a basic grid design for the story with characters down one axis and plot elements across the other. We then chose four couples from the documentary and dissected each of their stories into six separate segments: glimpses into the couples' lives, how they met, the moments before the wedding, their wedding vows, the subsequent kiss, and what they did afterwards. We filled in the grid with screenshots from the documentary that users click to view each story segment. This allows them to dive into any one of the couples' stories at any random point.

We also offered the viewer a more structured option of

viewing a longer segment of the video, either following the story of one couple through all their experiences, or seeing one experience at a time through every couple's perspective. The result is online on the NewsLab Web site at <http://www.newslab.org/matrix/matrix3.htm>



The point of this experiment was to develop a basic structure that could easily be adapted to tell a news story online, giving viewers an entirely different experience from seeing the on-air version. The grid structure could also provide an outlet

for additional material that can't be used on the air because of time constraints. Any story in which characters' lives intersect would be a candidate for this kind of treatment. For example, a crime story might feature a relative of the victim, a prosecutor, and a defense attorney along one axis, and the crime, trial and punishment along the other. Or a consumer investigation might have a buyer, a business owner and the state attorney general on one axis, and comments about a product, a complaint, and action taken along the other.

We hope you'll decide to try this with one of your stories, and that you'll share your experience with us at NewsLab.

## Trade Tips

Why use natural sound in a news story? Photojournalists will tell you that audio adds presence and rhythm. "Sound is the punctuation of visual storytelling," says WBFF's Scott Livingston. "It also helps give the story pace that will hopefully keep the viewer involved in your story." New research says he's right. A University of Alabama study compared viewers' reactions to stories with nat sound breaks to the same stories told without natural sound. The results showed that viewers paid more attention to the stories with natural sound.



image © 1998 PhotoDisc, Inc.

Researcher Beth Bradford also looked at whether natural sound affected viewers' memory for the video in the stories. After watching the stories all the way through, participants were shown clips from each story to see if they recognized the video. Participants recognized fewer of the video clips that occurred during the natural sound break than those before or after the break, suggesting that it takes more effort to process video with natural sound. In addition, the stories with natural sound breaks appeared to have a higher overall recognition than the ones without breaks. But while this suggests that viewers remember nat sound stories better than stories told without nats, the result was not statistically significant. Expect more research to try to nail this down.

# Covering Health Policy

The vast majority of health stories on local television are medical reports: stories about diseases, lifestyles, and experimental treatments. They're interesting, but often less important to many viewers than issues like insurance coverage, prescription drug costs and access to health care. The trouble is those stories are harder to cover on TV.



talk. "Remind them they aren't speaking to their colleagues," says NBC's Bob Hager.

Avoid "wallpaper" video. Video should help viewers understand the story, and generic or file tape does little to achieve that goal. Shoot or obtain specific video for each story, if at all possible, and write something that helps viewers understand what they're looking at and why.

At NewsLab, we've developed strategies for tackling health policy stories, to make them interesting and understandable to your viewers. Among them:

Find a central character. "The art of getting public policy on TV," says PBS's Susan Dentzer, "is to go out and find the person whose plight encapsulates at least some of the issue."

Help experts speak simply. Use plain language in your questions, so people will respond the way you

Use "show and tell" stand-ups to explain complicated issues. Or create graphics—especially animated graphics—to help make complex relationships and processes clear.

Other suggestions will help you plan and sell health policy stories in your newsroom. We also have links to resources and story ideas to get you started. So dive in, and add some depth to your health reports.

For more tips on covering health policy,  
check the NewsLab Web site at <http://www.newslab.org/healthpolicy.htm>



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