## Cover issues, not meetings

If a reporter heads off to "cover the City Council meeting," he's halfway to a boring story. Most meetings are dull, and are set up to be that way. The first 30 to 60 minutes of a typical city council or school board meeting are dominated by the Pledge of Allegiance, approval of the last meeting's minutes, the issuance of proclamations for Ear Health Week and certificates to honor roll students, and other routine matters that help ensure the room empties out before any real business is considered. The real business is then dispatched in language the average person is unlikely to understand. Many votes are taken without discussion because council members have already made up their minds, and when there is a debate it can be as action packed as moss growing. A story that sets out to report on this meeting is unlikely to raise readers' heart rates.

But don't confuse dullness with meaninglessness. The City Council, after its proclamations, droning debates, and jargon-laden speeches, might change hundreds or thousands of lives with a new ordinance limiting the number of pets per household, a budget that eliminates police and firefighting jobs, or a vote to allow nude dancing at a downtown nightclub. Each of these issues, and the countless other questions tackled by city government, is a problem that affects numerous stakeholders who have an opportunity to act. But covering the issue — instead of the meeting — requires reporting outside City Hall.

A good government reporter will pick up an agenda as soon as it's ready, usually a few days before the meeting. The reporter will already be familiar with issues that the board has been working on and will review the agenda to see if any of those issues are moving forward. Any intriguing new items will catch her eye, as well. She'll talk on background with the board clerk or a trusted official to learn about the most important or contentious issues. And that begins the reporting process. The next steps are asking the people behind the proposal what problem they're trying to solve, identifying and interviewing stakeholders, and getting a sense of who's likely to talk at the meeting. By the meeting's start, the story should be thoroughly reported and might be partly written. When you cover the issue instead of the meeting, a relevant story will follow.

But not all meetings involve relevant issues or serious questions, you say. Some are boring from start to finish, with procedural matters that affect few people or involve little to disagree over. How do you write an interesting story about that? And the answer is: You don't. When you resolve to cover issues and not meetings, you remove the obligation to write a story about every meeting you attend. If there's no news from a meeting, don't go back and write a 15-inch story about nothing to fill the space. Bag the story, or brief it for the record. Save your energy and newsprint for a story that is interesting, and relevant.

Don't use this as an excuse to blow off a meeting with a dry-sounding agenda — you could be surprised at any time by a resignation, a passionate citizen speaker, a last-minute proposal to raise or lower taxes or change the city's name. And don't use it as an excuse to put less government news in the paper. Use it as an opportunity to find relevant news with an impact on the people you cover — whether it originates in a boardroom, a classroom, a church meeting room, or a chance encounter at a grocery store. Cover issues, not meetings.

## Cover people, not events

*The State News* at Michigan State University decided in the 1990s that getting a broader range of racial, ethnic, and gendered groups into the paper was important enough to create a job for it: the diversity beat. The position was a good step toward helping the newsroom and the community learn about and accept differences in people's backgrounds, beliefs, and cultures. The paper runs dozens of "diversity" stories every semester, covering a tremendous array of university groups. And yet, somehow, many of these stories — whose intention is to celebrate differences — come out sounding the same. Look at two front-page leads from a single edition, in stories about separate cultural events, "Soulful Roots" and "Latin Xplosion":

**Lead 1**: Wearing a traditional West African shirt called a "buba," eighth-grader Garrion Lang looked out solemnly at the audience gathered in the Auditorium on Sunday night. The crowd then went wild as he and several other classmates from Sankofa Shule Academy in Lansing beat drums and danced barefoot, filling the large room with rhythm and energy."[10]

**Lead 2**: Wearing a gold loincloth and sparkle body paint, Ricardo Leon blew his whistle to kick off the Latin Xplosion talent show Saturday night in Fairchild Theatre. Dressed in Mardi Gras costumes, 10 dancers followed each other down the aisles of the theater and threw candy to the audience.[11]

These leads are each OK in their own right. Both show the reporters were applying their senses and trying to place readers at the scene. But picture this style of lead repeated once or twice a day over the course of a semester, and then a year. Do these stories over time paint unique portraits of the people and cultures involved? To me, they resemble cookies stamped from the same cutter but decorated with different-colored sprinkles. The story zooms in on an individual engaged in an exotic cultural activity. It describes the wardrobe; the moves; the food, if applicable; and the audience. It says what group is hosting the awareness-raising event. It quotes people talking about the importance of awareness and heritage. And, if sensitive and accurate, it may well please the people who put on the event. But it does little to create the personal connections required to make diversity successful.

The problem with this approach is very similar to the problem with covering meetings — the focus is on structure and procedure rather than people and impact. Diversity is all about individuals striving to find their place in the world, sometimes through groups of people with similar backgrounds and ideas, sometimes in less familiar settings, sometimes alone. Our failure to embrace diversity is principally a failure to see other people as human as ourselves, a weakness that is not easily transcended through repeat coverage of parades and festivals. The way to engage readers in a story of diversity — or for that matter any of the routine event stories that interns and weekend reporters are so often sent out to cover — is to tell the story of a person.

Look at this example from *The State News*, also off the diversity beat:

> Judith Njogu smiles at strangers since her arrival to the United States from Nairobi, Kenya.

In Kenya, people are friendly and hospitable only after having their initial introduction, said Njogu, a medical technology and premedical senior.

"You don't go smiling at strangers," she said.

But Njogu said she appreciates grins from those she's not familiar with and likes to smile back.

"These days I do," she said. "I realize it's a good thing now that I have been exposed to it."

Njogu, who traveled to Michigan in December 2000, described her experiences adapting to the United States in her first place entry for the 2nd Annual International Student Essay Contest offered by the Office for International Students and Scholars, or OISS. Her essay was picked out of 145 submissions, and Njogu will be recognized today, and awarded $1,000.

Participating students described both positive and frustrating experiences since their arrival in the United States. They were encouraged to describe the high and low points of their transition, as well as events that occurred on or off campus and in the classroom.

"Being very independent and having no family in the country, you have to make big decisions for yourself," Njogu said. "If something gets really bad you can always go back to your parents' house. But here, if something goes really bad, it's just me."

Njogu said international students form deep friendships with each other early to substitute familial bonds.

One of the goals of the essay contest was to alert all students on campus to what international students go through, said Rosemary Max, assistant director of OISS.

Max said after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, it has become harder for international students to travel to the United States without undergoing much more scrutiny. She said reports on the students are sent to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security every semester.

The distance quickly makes the students mature and become independent, Max said.

"It's a lot farther than driving from Grand Rapids," she said. "It's a lot more of a treacherous journey these students go through. They sacrifice a lot to be at Michigan State." ...[12]

The lead in this story does two things well: It introduces us to a person, a character, around whom the story will revolve. The standard alternative would have been a lead about how "The 2nd Annual International Student Essay Contest offered by the Office for International Students and Scholars will be honoring its winners today" — which would be unlikely to capture much attention.

The other thing it does is apply the nice personal introduction directly to the point of the story. Njogu was recognized for an essay about adapting to a new culture, and her social adaptation is what we learn about in the first paragraphs. So the lead is both engaging and topical — a perfect match. The paper also ran a mug shot of Njogu, which gave readers an

opportunity to see her smiling face for themselves. Portrayed as a real person, she becomes relevant.

## Authority

On Sept. 11, 2005, newspapers across the country published the following story, compiled and written by more than a dozen Knight Ridder staffers:

> Two weeks after Hurricane Katrina crashed into the Gulf Coast, there is little argument that the response was botched. But an extensive Knight Ridder review of official actions in the days just before and after Katrina's landfall Monday, Aug. 29, reveals a depth of government hesitancy and a not-my-job attitude that may have cost scores of people their lives. ...
>
> [W]hat's clear is that four years after terrorists flew hijacked aircraft into buildings in New York and Washington, the United States is no better prepared to respond to catastrophe — even when it comes with days of warning. ...
>
> The Federal Emergency Management Agency, its top ranks filled by political appointees and its budget hit by deep cuts, seemed unable to grasp the magnitude of the disaster. ...[13]

A couple of things from this story are worth noticing:

■ The forceful language. Government's response to Hurricane Katrina was "botched." Officials displayed a "not-my-job attitude." The country is "no better prepared to respond to catastrophe" than before Sept. 11. The Federal Emergency Management Agency "seemed unable to grasp the magnitude of disaster." These are direct indictments of official performance.

■ The lack of attribution. Not one of the phrases above is credited to a source, official or unofficial. The strong assertions in the story aren't the opinions of other people, they're the bold conclusions of journalists who had covered the hurricane since it blew ashore in late August.

The story, which some papers labeled as analysis, walks readers through responses to the storm by all levels of government, laying responsibility on local, state, and federal officials of both political parties. It is not "objective" in the traditional sense, because the story, from the outset, dismisses any argument that officials handled the storm effectively.

Instead, it's written from a position of *authority*, in an assertive, self-confident voice that commands attention. The journalists contributing to this effort believe their reporting — not what they *think*, but what they've *observed* — supports these conclusions. As we discussed in Chapter 4, taking sides isn't necessarily a journalistic sin if the reporting relies on a disciplined approach of open-minded questioning and thorough verification. The method is invalid if the reporter is working to satisfy an ideological or partisan urge. But if you approach the story with the authoritative neutrality of a referee, intent on presenting the best possible information to help citizens understand the world, this methodology is not only defensible, but necessary.

*Washington Post* media critic Howard Kurtz took note of the authoritative, and occasionally combative, reporting of journalists covering Katrina's aftermath — like the CNN corre-

spondent from Chapter 4 who scolded a U.S. senator who seemed detached from reality. "For once," Kurtz wrote, "reporters were acting like concerned citizens, not passive observers. And they were letting their emotions show. ... Maybe, just maybe, journalism needs to bring more passion to the table."[14] Passion, of course, can open journalists to charges of bias, which have become an unavoidable occupational hazard in recent years. Fear of bias accusations has sown seeds of timidity throughout the nation's reporting ranks, resulting in rampant abuse of the media by savvy manipulators. The best weapon against those criticisms is not withdrawing into a shell, but, as Kurtz suggests, asserting ourselves as concerned citizens.

Let's acknowledge that journalists have always brought certain biases to their work — and that some biases are healthy, while others are not. No good news reporter should, and almost none does, push a political agenda. But reporters have almost always acted on the bias that, for instance, crime is bad. You don't see many police stories that try to be fair to the idea that murder and robbery are OK. The same is true of natural disasters, shoddy roads, and poorly educated children. Bad, bad, bad. No one has a qualm with these obvious biases. But most journalists harbor other deeply rooted values that are both inevitable and essential for people who trade on the First Amendment. They include:

- A bias toward openness and against secrecy. When officials try to keep information from the public without an extraordinarily good reason, journalists go on the offensive. They should, because they are professional advocates for the flow of information to citizens. And they should be equally aggressive in targeting Democratic, Republican, and bipartisan efforts to keep people in the dark.
- A bias toward honesty. It is not enough to report an official assertion you know to be untrue and go to bed thinking you've done your job. People who attempt to deceive the public must be confronted.
- A bias toward citizen participation in government affairs. This bias is the foundation of what has been called "public" or "civic" journalism, but more fundamentally it's a simple nod to democratic principles almost universally held by Americans. What supporter of our system is going to say people should be *less* involved in public affairs? How is it any more an affront to proper journalism to say citizen participation in government is good than to say that burglary and arson are bad?

Putting together stories that exercise these biases — toward openness, toward honesty, toward participation — requires writing with authority.

ANOTHER ASPECT OF this principle showed up on the front page of the *Detroit Free Press*, which has run signed columns in place of bylined news stories, complete with the writer's mug shot and personal voice. For former *Free Press* Publisher and Editor Carole Leigh Hutton, breaking news is part of a columnist's job. And when a columnist has a big story — such as a major road construction project or the Dow Jones Industrial Average reaching a new low for the year — it should run on the front page.

"I love to put columnists on 1A, but usually not just because they're expressing an opinion on something," Hutton said.[15] "Readers relate to them more than to bylines. And columnists are often the best writers, which means they tell the story best. ... In fact, I think columnists probably add to a reader's understanding because they write more conversationally."

The same month Hutton commented on front-page columns, the *Free Press* ran one by Dawson Bell, the political reporter we heard from in Chapters 3 and 5. Bell was writing about the Michigan leg of a high-profile concert tour in support of Democratic causes. Under the headline "Bush bashing during shows could backfire for Democrats," Bell wrote:

> Like parents averting their eyes until a child has gotten safely offstage at a middle school talent show, the political pros behind the Vote For Change tour have to be looking forward to Oct. 12.
>
> That's the day after all their entertainer/activists conclude the battleground states tour (of which Michigan was a part Sunday) and they can count the money.
>
> In the meantime, the hours are filled with forced smiles, crossed fingers and gritted teeth. As long as the stars play lots of music and limit their political commentary to the trite and inane, everything will be OK. But danger lurks around every venue: One eight-letter chant starting with a common profanity and ending with Bush and led by an excitable pop icon might send the whole thing south.
>
> Because, as frustrating as it is for the liberal activists sponsoring the tour to acknowledge, they know most voters aren't especially attracted by that kind of message. It's even likely that a significant number of people buying tickets don't hate the president at all. They just like music. ...[16]

That's not your typical front-page campaign story, but it sure is authoritative. And it's *interesting.*

## Tone and drama

Here are three leads culled from Google News on a single day:

After several proposals and adjustments, Alameda County may finally be one step closer to building a courthouse in east Dublin.[17]

A city council proposal that would require customers to show identification before buying a popular craft product is one step closer to becoming reality.[18]

The Chapel Hill Police Department came one step closer Wednesday afternoon to completing its investigation of a recent rash of breaking and enterings around Cameron Avenue.[19]

If you've figured out what these sentences have in common, you're one step closer to understanding the predictable, bland nature of the formulaic news lead. Reporters are obliged to cover the incremental phases of a proposal's life span, from the moment it's introduced through committee meetings, public hearings, amendments, and votes. By the time they've written the fourth or fifth story about the same thing, they're out of new ways to talk about it. And when the only news is that the same proposal they wrote about last time has

advanced to the next bureaucratic or legislative level, they pull out the "one step closer" standby — a sure signal to the reader that there is no need to proceed.

More than 25 years ago, Roy Peter Clark took a stab at livening up a "one step closer" story:

> The action picked up in Wednesday's episode of "The Budget and How to Cut It," a continuing drama featuring the citizens' Budget Review Committee and the stars of city government.
>
> In Monday's episode we left committee chairman L. Harold Corbett frustrated by the committee's inability to make specific recommendations on how the public's money should be spent.
>
> But Corbett's mood changed Wednesday as committee members challenged some features of City Manager Raymond E. Harbaugh's proposed $77.6-million budget. ...[20]

While not as scintillating as an episode of *General Hospital*, this story is groundbreaking in its attempt to portray public affairs as a dramatic event. Long before most people began talking about it, Clark recognized that bringing wit and style to basic stories can enliven seemingly dull developments.

"That was the only city council meeting I ever covered," said Clark, who, with a background in literature and composition, had been hired as a writing coach at the *St. Petersburg Times*. "I had this instinct to try to make this interesting because the editors thought it was important enough to send me there." Clark says journalists set the bar too low for routine assignments, loping from meeting to meeting for fear of missing something, rather than "affirmatively embracing the duty both to inform and entertain. I'm using 'entertain' not in a vaudeville show sense but in a classic literary sense that the dual purposes of literature are to delight and instruct — and it's hard to do one without the other."[21]

It's not uncommon for a feature story to recreate a moment, like the point of crisis in a narrative yarn where the character has to make a life-altering choice. This technique, done well, is a gripping way to start a story and can make readers forget they're reading. But how often have you seen this method applied to coverage of important legislation, or the hiring of a school superintendent, or the innovation that saved $5 million in tax money? These aren't life-or-death matters, but they involve smart, dedicated people solving problems. And here's the place where the problem-solving model of public affairs reporting intersects with the mandate to make it interesting: A story in which characters battle obstacles to resolve a problem is the hallmark of narrative fiction. In other words, when you present public issues as problems to be solved, you offer yourself the language and structure to form a narrative plot. The facts might not be as inherently dramatic as the contents of an adventure tale, but for the people involved in your story, the drama is real. Careers and promotions and reputations and personal goals are on the line. And if you've chosen the story for its public importance, the stakes are automatically high — the drama is embedded in the story. Watching almost anybody do what they do best is fascinating, be it a fly fisherman, a lawyer (how many movies build to a climactic performance in a courtroom?), a parks and recreation director, or a classroom teacher. If you can find your way to a person in the zone, excelling at her job, meeting her calling, you can find a good story.

# Chapter 7: Refuse to Be Boring

The trick to writing vivid public affairs stories is to break down the psychological barrier against being interesting. There are a lot of books about good nonfiction writing, and all of their advice can be brought to bear not just on the harrowing tale of the rescue from a forest fire or the inspiring story of the athlete who beat cancer, but also on the downfall and redemption of a local politician or a neighborhood's complex struggle against poverty and blight. Public affairs news will get more interesting immediately if reporters stop separating news and features in their minds and just find the best way to tell the truth.

Here are some excerpts from a story that launched a monthlong project about the future of Chesapeake, Va.:

> On a sticky day last summer the Southside Civic League begins its regular monthly meeting with a prayer inside a long, narrow meeting room at the Bethel Apostolic Church. The air conditioner is on the fritz.
>
> The civic league members are talking about the grass and what to do about it.
>
> They are telling Jack Bider, their community police officer, about neighbors who don't cut their grass or keep their shrubbery trimmed. It is not a cosmetic issue. They don't want to give criminals any more places to hide.
>
> A 10-minute drive up Battlefield Boulevard, in what is in many ways a world away but still is Chesapeake, Little League baseball players are making good use of the grass. They won't have it for long.
>
> *"Doogie, third base, baby! I got your number!"*
>
> The third baseman taunts the batter. They are teammates and this is just a practice, but when the batter misses a couple of pitches, the third baseman gets on his case, tells him he bats like Rafael So-and-So.
>
> Doogie nails a solid line drive into center field, to the general approval of everyone, including his taunter.
>
> That ball field already is gone, a morass of mud on its way to becoming another parking lot near City Hall.
>
> Chesapeake's history is made up of moments like these. Decisions, large and small, about what to do with the grass and woods that once covered the land here, have determined what the city is today and what it will be tomorrow.
>
> Tough decisions lie ahead.
>
> The Chesapeake of people's dreams may not be the Chesapeake they can afford. Despite its relative affluence, the city is struggling to pay for basics. It owes $500 million borrowed to build schools, roads and other expensive necessities.
>
> That debt isn't going away any time soon. Neither will the needs: In the next six years the school system alone has proposed more than $254 million in projects. And, unlike Virginia Beach, Chesapeake can't depend on tourism money to help pay the bills.
>
> There are consequences with each choice. Citizens may decide, as they have in the past, that they can stomach a tax increase to pay for schools and roads, but raise taxes too much and you hurt the business climate. Hurt the business

climate and you endanger the very tax base that pays for schools and roads in the first place.

[...]

Newcomers driving down Battlefield Boulevard or George Washington Highway might notice only the traffic, how the roads just aren't wide enough for all the cars.

Those who have been here a while remember how things used to be.

See that? Over there is where the old mercantile used to stand. Now it's a 7-Eleven. That over there used to be acres and acres of farm land. Now it's a development.

But you needn't have been here long to see the city change and grow.

Chances are you have an opinion about what to do with the grass.

[...]

Though it might not seem likely when you're stuck in traffic on Battlefield Boulevard, only a little more than a quarter of the city's 353 square miles is developed. There still are farms, but the owners soon may have to decide whether it would be better to grow crops or houses.

As they decide what to do with the grass, the people in South Norfolk and Indian River need to make their decisions, too. For the oldest areas of the city, the days of booming growth may have passed, but not the hopes of the people who live there. Those people worry that, as the city tries to ensure that the newcomers get what they came for, those who have been here all along might lose what they stayed for.

But they're not as alone as they might think, because it doesn't take long to become an old-timer in Chesapeake, to see your way of life change in ways small and large.

You need only have been here months to say: That used to be a ball field. Now it's a parking lot.

Pay attention.

In 20 years, even sooner, all this will be history.[22]

This is a public affairs story. It's about the policy decisions that confront a city of 200,000 people. But it's not just based on a meeting, and it's not just a jumble of facts. It's a *story*. Let's look at just a few of the literary devices that make this writing so compelling:

■ **Scene setting.** The first paragraph describes "a sticky day" in a church meeting room where "the air conditioner is on the fritz." You can almost feel the humidity and see people wiping brows and tugging at shirt collars as they try to solve problems in their neighborhood.

■ **A quick cut.** The story jumps abruptly from the cramped church to an open baseball field a few minutes away. We see a ballplayer named Doogie nailing "a solid line drive into center field, to the general approval of everyone."

■ **Dialogue**. Just a snatch of it, as Doogie gets heckled with "Third base, baby! I got your number!" The natural language lends authenticity to the scene.

■ **Foreshadowing**. We learn at the beginning of the ball field scene that the players "won't

have it for long." And we learn just a few paragraphs later that even as we're reading the story, the field has become a muddy place awaiting transformation into a parking lot. The ball field appears and disappears before our eyes, a microcosm of the story's theme of a city in constant flux.

■ **Nut graphs**. After setting a couple of scenes that viscerally draw the reader into the rhythms of life in the city, the writer ties those scenes into a couple of paragraphs that reveal and summarize the purpose of the story. The transition to the nut graphs is: "Chesapeake's history is made up of moments like this. Decisions, large and small, about what to do with the grass and woods that once covered the land here, have determined what the city is today and what it will be tomorrow." Numbers and examples illustrating the tough decisions follow in the next couple of paragraphs.

■ **Symbolism**. There are five mentions of what to do with the grass in Chesapeake: specific images of a civic league wanting it neat and trimmed and ballplayers sinking their feet in it, and then general references, beginning with the nut graphs, to the larger question of "what to do with the grass in a 353-square-mile city." The grass symbolizes the decisions about whether to develop, where to develop, how to develop. Do residents preserve the grass or tear it up?

■ **Direct address to the reader**. The writer invites you to "see" the site of the old mercantile, now a 7-Eleven, and that former field, now a nest of homes. She practically grasps your arm to direct you toward these images.

■ **Authority**. As we talked about above, more authoritative stories are almost always more efficient and compelling. There are no direct attributions in the parts of the story I've excerpted, but thorough reporting is evident. The reporter was in the church. She was at the ball field. She's driven these roads and researched the statistics. The quality of her knowledge establishes her credibility and informs her writing throughout the story.

■ **An ending that returns to the beginning**. Along with the recurring grass theme, one of the last paragraphs revisits an image from the top of the story, as the writer reminds the reader, "You need only have been here months to say: That used to be a ball field. Now it's a parking lot."

This story jumped to a two-page package that included quotes from Chesapeake residents, charts showing population and demographic trends, sidebars explaining where, why and how the city was growing, and a range of choices about future development that readers were encouraged to consider and discuss. And the series continued for three more weeks. But on its own, the story is a wonderful, compact example of just how compelling public policy can be when the reporting and writing is literally down to earth, down in the grass.

## Humor and surprise

John-Henry Doucette of *The Virginian-Pilot* was working on a story about how local residents could talk with their mayors. The recently elected mayor of Suffolk, Bobby Ralph, held office hours reserved just for constituents — a rare level of accessibility that Doucette thought "was kind of neat." He figured he'd take the opportunity to regionalize the story, so he'd spent some time talking with officials in nearby cities about how their mayors did it. And he and a photographer arranged a time to observe Mayor Ralph meeting with citizens.

"We kept trying to set up a day when he had people who would agree to let us in,"

Doucette said.[23] It turned out to be a day in early December. "He had two appointments that morning. We sat through the whole morning with him and he went through everything." They got more than they bargained for:

> SUFFOLK — The bespectacled mayor sat behind his desk at City Hall as his assistant brought him coffee with a little cream and Sweet'N Low.
>
> Wearing a silk peanut-patterned tie, the first-term mayor checked his messages. His 9:30 a.m. was due any second.
>
> In walked Santa Claus.
>
> "Little Bobby Ralph grown up to be mayor!" said Claus, who is really Ernest B. Hefferon, a paint contractor. He hadn't had time to change his clothes between Santa gigs. Ralph rose and extended his right hand. Hefferon accepted, and a bell around his wrist jingled.
>
> Claus had arrived alone, yet joked in first person plural: "We've got a few bones to pick with the mayor. We need a bigger landing space."
>
> Kidding aside, Suffolk Mayor Bobby L. Ralph has kept morning office hours on Tuesdays and Thursdays since this summer, when he took office and hung out his shingle at City Hall. This has brought him face-to-face with about 40 folks in a modest office on the second floor.
>
> Ralph said he decided to hold the regular office hours to be more accessible to constituents. His predecessor also met with individuals by appointment, but didn't hold regular public hours. That's the way most mayors in Hampton Roads do business.
>
> But Ralph, who retired from the city's Department of Social Services when he was elected to the City Council in 2002, said it's good for the public and the city staffers to know when they can catch him.
>
> So far, he's had a good response, he said.
>
> Developers, business honchos, neighborhood captains and gadflies have stopped by, generally by appointment.
>
> "I've had a couple of, I guess, you call it the critics, the habitual critics of the city administration," Ralph said.
>
> Hefferon, 43, is president of the West End Civic League.
>
> He took a seat, as did the mayor. Ralph asked about a neighborhood traffic issue.
>
> Seen any improvement?
>
> Yes, Hefferon said, before adding: "We've still got these criminal activities."
>
> Vandalism?
>
> A recent break-in.
>
> The mayor's cellular phone went off. He pulled it out and shut off the device.
>
> Hefferon continued.
>
> "One of the things I wanted to talk to you about is a federation of civic leagues," he said. "I think Norfolk does it."
>
> "I think it would be something that's worthy of the civic leagues talking

about," Ralph said.

"I'm available when committees are being formed," Hefferon said, wrapping up.

"Good enough," Ralph said.

"I appreciate your time this morning," Hefferon said.

He left.

"I had no idea Santa was coming," the mayor said. He checked his schedule.

"Lets see, 10:30. ... "[24]

Doucette had one story planned when he walked into the mayor's office that morning. He walked out with a different story. "When you're covering something, and something much cooler happens, that's the story," Doucette said. "I like stories that are about people and not about stuff. ... If you wrote a story that said, 'The mayor allows people to come in and talk to him, sources said Monday,' who cares? But you got a bureaucrat hanging out and in walks Santa Claus — you've got a story."

In less than 450 words, Doucette's story accomplishes a great deal. First and foremost, it gets read. It's just a story about a mayor holding office hours, but the lead hooks you and the story carries you along so easily you forget you're reading. Secondly, it gives you a chuckle. The image of Santa marching into a mayor's office to talk about traffic and vandalism in his neighborhood is incongruous enough to at least evoke a smile. And most importantly — but unlikely without the first condition — the story sheds light on a meaningful communication between the city's top official and a concerned citizen, showing readers just how easy a partnership between mayors and residents can be. In a few hundred words, it breaks down the us-and-them barrier between the government and the governed.

Give credit to fate for putting a guy in a Santa suit in front of a reporter on what could have been a much more routine assignment. But share that credit with a reporter who was able to see how one bright moment made for a more effective story than the longer piece he had planned. And give a hand to the editors who, rather than stifling Doucette's instinct, helped him put the story together and put it into the paper. Not all reporters would see that story, and not all editors would publish it. Frankly, not every attempt to pull off a story like this will work — and people need to be willing to acknowledge a noble failure and try again. More successful stories like this would almost certainly draw more readers, not in a frivolous way, but in a way that fostered a collaborative spirit in the community.

Tom Warhover, executive editor of the *Columbia Missourian* and an associate professor of journalism at the University of Missouri, who once worked with Doucette and me at *The Virginian-Pilot*, is afraid journalism schools aren't doing enough to help reporters recognize good stories when they see them — the kind of stories that don't show up in bold print on meeting agendas or press releases, but bubble up from overheard conversations or everyday events.[25] The kind of stories Tom Rosenstiel describes as "demand-side" journalism.

The vital news values of timeliness and urgency that lead to event-driven coverage also create blinders against stories that didn't happen yesterday but affect people in unique and surprising ways. If you study newspapers awhile, it's amazing how predictable they become. A woman in a study for the Readership Institute complained that whenever she watched television news, she knew what would be in the paper the next day. Readership Institute

research has found that breaking this mold, amusing and surprising people, is a good way of attracting readers.[26]

In the end, to tell important stories, you have to find an audience. If you make people work to see their stake in public affairs, they're going to find something else to do. But if you can help people enjoy learning about their communities and participating in public life, you serve your readers, your community *and* your employer.

## How not to be boring

■ Cover issues, not meetings. Find the stories that affect readers, and report those stories. Represent as many stakeholders as possible, not just the officials. If there's no news from a meeting you cover, write a brief.

■ Cover people, not events. When you're writing about a rally for the homeless, a Native American powwow, a walk to fight cancer, or any of the countless quick-hit stories that reporters are sent out to cover, find people and tell their stories. Look for the details that make a person unique, and the emotions that make her just like everyone else. Use the assignment to help people understand one another better.

■ Write with authority. Get to know your beat, your sources, and your subject well enough that you can explain the news to readers in your own words. Have the courage to make blunt assertions of what you know to be true, if you can support them with facts. Do not report or write to push a personal agenda, and never withhold information that weakens your assertions; rather, report and write with a relentless aim to give citizens the best information they need to make good decisions.

■ Assert your democracy-friendly biases toward open government, honest conduct, and citizen participation in public decisions.

■ Apply the literary tools of features, sports, and creative nonfiction to public affairs reporting. Get over the notion that government and civic news has to be dry and institutional. Build characters, set scenes, create suspense, appeal to the senses, play with structure, directly address the reader. Tell stories you'd read even if you weren't paid to read them. Tell them like you're trying to make a friend listen. But DON'T make anything up.

■ Bring humor to stories, when appropriate.

■ Find stories that surprise. Broaden your news judgment beyond event-driven, institution-initiated news and keep your eyes peeled for things that are interesting. Something doesn't have to have happened yesterday to be important, and we miss a lot of big stories by insisting on a time peg. If readers don't know it, it's news to them.

■ Break every traditional rule of journalism and writing — within the ethical boundaries of honesty, fairness, accuracy, and clarity — to get readers interested in the important questions faced by our democracy.