

# The Producing Process 3

**B**y now, you have a pretty good idea of what a producer does to get a newscast on the air. So far, we have only talked about these duties in the abstract sense. It is now time to take a closer look at the step-by-step process of putting a show together.

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## Story Ideas and News Value

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A newscast starts with a series of story ideas, which are nothing more than potential ideas that could eventually end up in the show. Story ideas come from a variety of sources, and the good producer will often come to work with several story ideas already formulated. These may come from other media, be follow-ups from stories done the previous day, or be a consequence of personal observation (see Table 3.1 for examples).

Producers like their reporters to come to work with story ideas, and reporters should have some concrete suggestions for stories, even if these ideas never pan out. Too many reporters show up with the expectation that producers will have a story already assigned to them. This can waste a lot of precious news time as reporters scramble to try and set up a story or contact news sources.

Producers and reporters will suggest their story ideas at the editorial meeting, where they and the news director will discuss events going on in the area. The purpose of the meeting is to consider all possible story ideas and narrow them down to a list of stories that will go in the newscast. Some stories are included for obvious reasons—they involve important breaking news or have a special significance in the community. If the area

**Table 3.1** Examples of Sources for Story Ideas

<i>Source</i>	<i>Comment</i>
Other media	Getting story ideas from the newspaper or other stations is fine, but avoid simply following what they are doing. Try to take a simple idea and expand it into something new. Competing stations should always be monitored but not necessarily copied.
News wires	News services like the Associated Press (AP) provide producers with hundreds of stories every day. Some of these stories can be run as items of national or regional interest. Others can be localized to the station's community. For example, if AP reports that binge drinking has increased on college campuses, the station can investigate the situation at the local school.
Beat system	If the station has enough resources, it can assign reporters to "beats"—covering the same story or issue every day (such as city hall or health). The problem is that most broadcast outlets do not have enough reporters to assign them to beats. Most have to be general assignment reporters, covering different stories every day.
News releases	Stations receive dozens, maybe even hundreds of news releases every day, and it is up to the producer to determine their news value. Some are simply notices of meetings, organizational happenings, etc. Others might have items of genuine interest. It is important for the producer to realize that all of these releases are essentially public relations tools, and the people that send them have a specific agenda. The governor wants you to attend his news conference so he can talk about a new initiative, not to ask him questions that might generate negative coverage. When using news releases to shape story coverage, producers should always be aware of the agenda behind them.
News tips	One thing you will learn about working in the news business: There is never a shortage of people willing to give their opinion. People constantly call the newsroom with story ideas or tips, most of which never amount to anything. However, you should never automatically dismiss any tip. Not only does it make the caller mad, but you might actually miss out on a good story. This is especially true in an age when most people have cell phones and can call stations from the scene of breaking news. If possible, always double check the information before committing news resources.
Recycling old stories	Many stories have a long shelf life and can be brought back at appropriate times, such as anniversaries. One-year, 5-year, and 10-year stories are extremely popular, as are stories that observe the anniversary date of a particular event.
Personal observation	Some of the best story ideas come from simple observation or individual ingenuity. You may notice something new on the way to work or read a small announcement in the paper that could lead to a big story. Producers and reporters should always keep their eyes open in the community and be on the lookout for story ideas.

is threatened by severe weather, for example, the station will make sure to emphasize that story in its news coverage.

The most obvious consideration in selecting story ideas for the show is news value (Table 3.2). Certain elements of a story idea make it more attractive to the audience, such as geographical proximity or timeliness. Just as important, some elements of a story idea make it unattractive, such as stories that simply fill air time, are done because they're expedient, or are considered overly superficial or sensational.

Not all story ideas are accepted or rejected based on news merit. The resources a station has often dictates how and if it will cover a certain story. For example, the big story of the day might be a court case involving a prominent local citizen. If the trial takes place several hours from the station, however, that will affect the station's coverage. The news director might ideally want live coverage of the story, but a live shot might be technically impossible given the distance involved. Therefore, some alternative form of coverage will have to be considered.

Thus not only do stations decide what stories to cover but how to cover them (Table 3.3). Generally, the more important stories are given live coverage or extended time by reporters. Stories not considered important can be read on the desk by the anchors or handled with a short interview. But again, this is not always determined by news value. Available resources play a part, as does the news deadline. Reporters need additional time to put together extended stories; engineers also need more time to set up live coverage. Distance between the story and the station is also a factor, as drive time to and from stories must be considered.

During the editorial meeting, the news staff will decide on the nature and format of many of the stories in the show. Reporters and producers will get their assignments, and they will be responsible for putting together stories of a predetermined length. Live shots often run in excess of 2 minutes because they include so many unpredictable elements. Almost every station has a story about a live shot that was accidentally knocked off the air or disturbed in some other fashion. Packages typically run in the range of 1½ minutes; a reader or SOT might go anywhere from 15 to 45 seconds.

Of course, this depends on the nature of the story involved. For an extremely important story, reporters will get extra time. In some cases, the producer will decide to use "team coverage" and have different reporters work on different aspects of the story. For example, in the case of severe weather, one reporter might report on the traffic situation, another on the damage to homes and property, another on school closings, and so on.

## Rundowns

Once a producer has a list of stories and their formats, the task of actually putting the show together begins.

**Table 3.2** What Gives a Story News Value?

<i>Quality</i>	<i>Comment</i>
Timeliness	This is especially important in the age of the Internet and cable news, where people can get news any time of day or night. The news cycle continues to shrink, and people want their information now—not hours or even minutes from now.
Relevance	How does the story affect the lives of the audience? Why should the people watching or listening at home care about this story? These are the questions producers should ask about all story ideas. If it does not affect a large number of people in the audience in some way, it has little news value.
Proximity (geographic and emotional)	Certainly geographic proximity plays a role in news value. If something important happens close to home, that makes a big difference to the local audience. But there is also news value in emotional proximity. This is the kind of story that touches a common emotional chord in the audience, regardless of where it takes place. In fall 2002, the nation was gripped by the daring rescue of nine Pennsylvania coal miners trapped underground. The emotions of the story—anger, sadness, fear, and ultimately happiness and pride—gave it audience appeal far beyond the local region where the rescue took place.
Prominence	When something happens to someone famous, it makes news. A car accident involving two private citizens might rate a bare mention on the news, but if the mayor was involved, the story gets much more attention. Unfortunately, much of news is now focused on the famous and those with “celebrity,” even if they are not making news. Producers have to be careful not to let their coverage of viable news stories drift into the sensational.
Conflict	Politics, law, government, sports, and even the weather can be reduced to issues of conflict, whether it is one person against another or someone struggling against other obstacles. Ultimately, most of journalism is about reporting on how specific conflicts affect the audience. However, there is a danger in simply reporting the “he said, she said,” part of conflict. Good stories go beyond the conflict and examine the underlying issues.
Novelty	Every day in this country, thousands of people are victims of domestic abuse. So why do we remember the name of John Wayne Bobbitt? Because of the unusual circumstances surrounding the incident. The novel or unusual always has an interest for an audience. The problem is that with so many channels now available, and so many shows pushing the moral envelope, it is getting harder and harder to see something unique. Producers should avoid running novelty material just for the sake of sensationalism or titillation.

**Table 3.3** Story Formats

<i>Story Format</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Comment</i>
Live	Reporter goes live from scene, or a camera is set up to show events as they are happening.	Usually for the more important stories, and often done in combination with a packaged report. The use of live reporting often depends on the reliability of the live signal back to the station.
Package	A self-contained taped report put together by a reporter or anchor. Includes all the elements of a report (sound, video, etc.) in a complete "package."	Again, for the more important stories. Can be used in combination with a live report, introduced by the reporter from the news desk, or as a stand-alone story.
Interview	Also called SOT (sound on tape), sound bite, bite, or actuality (radio term). Usually a 10- to 20-second interview segment with a person connected to the story. Can be used alone or in conjunction with video.	When the story is not as important, or when the deadline is such that reporters do not have time to put together a package. Can also be introduced by the reporter from the news desk or from a live shot.
Phoner	A live report phoned in by the reporter (or some other person) at the scene of a story. Often used for breaking news.	Extremely common in radio news, especially with the advent of cell phones. Not used as much in television because of lack of visuals, but is appropriate for breaking news, short deadlines, or where it is impossible to provide video.
Reader	The news anchor reads a story on air, with no supporting audio or video elements.	Usually reserved for the least important stories or for breaking news reported at the last minute. Producers do not like to fill up their shows with readers because the stories often do not engage or interest the audience.

Every show has a *rundown*, one of the most important tools a producer uses. The rundown is simply an outline that allows the producer to create, edit, switch, or eliminate stories within the newscast. The key to a rundown is flexibility, because producers will constantly make changes in stories right up to news time and even into the show. For example, if

Page	Story/Slug	Type	OnCam	Writer	Editor
A01	HEADLINES	VO	ANGIE	Angie	
B01	COLD OPEN	SOT/VO		Angie	MISSY
B02	911 CELLPHONE-I	INTRO	ANGIE	Lindsay	
B03	911 CELLPHONE-P	PKG		Lindsay	LINDSAY
B04	FIREWORKS	LIVE/VO/S	ANGIE	Jim	JAMIE
B05	WX FIRST	VTR/LIVE		Jim	
B06	HENRY FISHER	VO	ANGIE	Angie	JAMIE
B06.5	DENNEHY-I	INTRO	ANGIE	Angie	
B07					
B09	JORDAN MCCOY	VO	ANGIE	Angie	MISSY
B10					
B11					
B12	TZ 2ND/GRAINS	VO/CG	Angie		MISSY

**Figure 3.1** Two Views of a Newscast Rundown

SOURCE: Photographs by Mary Lou Sheffer. Printed by permission.

breaking news happens during the newscast, the producer will have to insert it into the rundown in the appropriate place.

All newsroom personnel—the news director, producers, reporters, photographers, technical directors, control room operators, and anchors—work off the same rundown. Each person uses the rundown for a different reason. Technical directors want to know what tapes to run and in what order. Anchors want to know who will be reading what stories, and audio people need to know when to open (turn on) and close (shut off) microphones. Given all this, the rundown is probably the single most important resource in the newscast.

Each station uses a particular rundown style, but almost every rundown contains the same important information.

Table 3.4 shows an example of how a small segment of the rundown might look. A more complete version will be displayed later, but the important thing right now is the headings at the top of the rundown. All rundowns indicate the *story slug*, or the name of the story. Usually, this is an abbreviated one- or two-word description of the story. All newsroom personnel will refer to the story by this name, and it is in all capital letters for easy identification.

*Talent* refers to which anchor will read the story on the air. This can be indicated in several ways, including the initials of the anchor (BES), the camera number, or some other reference to the talent (Wx is a standard broadcasting abbreviation for weather). In the “STORM” story row, 2-SHT in this case refers to the fact that two anchors will both be reading. Their exact reading assignments will be detailed on the story script, which will be described later in this chapter.

The *format* refers to how the story will be presented on the air. In our example, the “STORM” story will be a live report, “SCHOOL” will have the anchor introduce a reporter package, and “WRECK” will have an anchor

**Table 3.4** Segment of a Typical Television News Rundown

<i>Slug</i>	<i>Talent</i>	<i>Format</i>	<i>Tape No.</i>	<i>ERT</i>	<i>Tape</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Runtime</i>	<i>Backtime</i>
STORM	2-SHT	Live	—	2:00	—	2:00	5:32:00	0:00
SCHOOL	BES	PKG	101	:20	1:40	2:00	5:34:00	+:10
WRECK	DFS	V/O	102	:20	—	:20	5:34:20	–:05
FORECAST	Wx	Live	—	1:00	—	1:00	5:35:20	0:00

Note: BES and DFS indicate the initials of the on-air talent; ERT, estimated running time; PKG, package; 2-SHT, two-shot (two anchors); V/O, voiceover; Wx, weather. Numbers in the ERT, Tape, Total, Runtime, and Backtime columns indicate time in minutes and seconds.

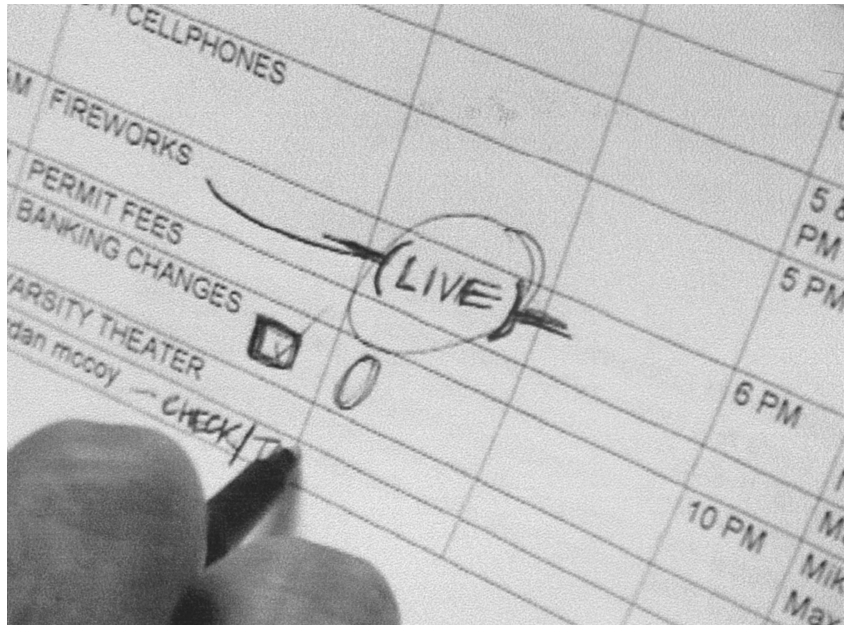
read over (or “voiceover”) video. In the “FORECAST” story, the weather person will deliver a live update on the forecast.

If there is a tape connected with the story, it must be assigned a *tape number*. This is essential information for the technical director and control room people, who need to know what tape is rolled at what point in the newscast. Tapes are usually assigned numbers or other designations to make this process easier, but the possibility of error or mix-up remains high. Tapes are often mislabeled, misplaced, or run at the wrong time in the show. More and more stations are converting to digital technology and putting stories on computer files rather than tape. Still, human error remains a constant problem.

*ERT* refers to the estimated running time of the story, which gives the producer an idea of how long the story will run. If there’s no tape involved, the *ERT* is simply a measure of how long it will take the anchors to read the story. In the days before newsroom computers, reading speed was often difficult to gauge, and producers usually had to guess based on the number of lines of copy on the script. Today’s producing software automatically calculates *ERT* based on the anchor’s own distinct reading speed.

If there is a tape involved, that time is indicated in the *tape* column. This indicates how long the taped piece in the story will run, generally around 15 seconds for a SOT and about 1½ minutes for a package. Producers expect reporters to keep their packages within a certain time framework. If the story comes in much heavier or lighter than projected, changes will have to be made elsewhere in the rundown, another reason that communication between producer and reporter is so important. It is possible to know exactly how long a taped segment lasts, unless the story is still being edited when the newscast starts.

The combination of the *ERT* and the *tape* gives the *total time* for the story. This lets the producer know exactly how much time each story will take and allows the producer to easily make changes to the newscast when



**Figure 3.2** Producers Make Constant Changes to the Rundown, Even During the Show  
 SOURCE: Photograph by Mary Lou Sheffer. Printed by permission.

necessary. If the show is very slow and taking too long (“running heavy”), the producer can glance at the rundown and perhaps eliminate stories of a certain length. If the show seems to be moving quickly and under the allotted time (“running light”), the producer can add stories or let the anchors know to adjust their reading speed.

Many rundowns will indicate a *runtime*, which helps the producer gauge how the show is timing out. This is the clock time when the story is scheduled to run. In our example, the “WRECK” story is supposed to run at 5:34:20. If it runs much earlier or later, producers will have to adjust their newscast accordingly.

A better indication of how the show is timing out is called *backtiming*. This is a function built in to most producing software that allows the producer to know if the show is running heavy or light. After each story, the backtiming column will indicate a certain amount of time. If the time is followed by a plus sign (+), the show is running light by that amount of time. In our “SCHOOL” example, after the story runs, the show is 10 seconds light, and that time will have to be accounted for somewhere else in the newscast. When the time is followed by a minus (–) sign, the show is running heavy by that amount of time. (Note: There is no set standard for these designations. Depending on the software, running heavy and running light could be indicated in different ways.)



In most circumstances, it's important to end a newscast at a specific time, with no margin for error. Many newscasts lead into network programming, which cannot be missed. Ideally, the producer wants to end the show with 0:00 showing in the backtiming column. This can get very tricky, considering all the changes the producer has to make to the newscast. Many producers prefer to go in with a "light" rundown (one with a smaller news hole), with the expectation that things will go wrong and slow things down. It's also easier to add material to a newscast (or ask the anchors to slow down) than it is to drop things or speed up. In any event, backtiming allows the producer to know the exact time of the show as it progresses.

Our discussion of the rundown has assumed that you as a producer will have access to production software. Most commercial stations around the country have such software, although it is not as common on college campuses. Even without a software program, you can create a rundown using an application like Microsoft Excel. If you are producing a show completely without the aid of a computer, it certainly makes things more difficult. Everything has to be done by hand (or typewriter), and the timing must be done with a stopwatch or some other clock with a second hand. The same basic principles of the rundown apply whether you're producing with or without a computer; the main difference is flexibility and the ability to make quick changes.

### *SKELETON RUNDOWNS*

Most stations use the same rundown format for each of their shows. There are certain elements that appear in the same place in the show every day—things like the opening sequence (the "show open"), weather and sports, and the closing sequence (the "show close"). This creates some consistency for the audience and makes the job of the producer much easier.

When the producer first sits down to work on the show, many of these elements are already in place. The producer uses some form of the skeleton rundown shown in Table 3.5 to start every show.

Table 3.5 clearly shows the elements that will stay the same in every newscast. For this particular station, the show opens with the anchors doing headlines, a short description of the top stories of the day. The show open and close are preproduced by the production department and rarely change. Only when a station wants to reshape its image will it change its open or close, as consistency helps create brand identity with the audience. The producer does not actively deal with these segments, other than to make sure they're accounted for in the rundown.

Weather and sports are usually given the same amount of time in each show, although this could change depending on the needs of the news department. Both are areas in which the producer has some flexibility to

**Table 3.5** Typical Skeleton Rundown

<i>Slug</i>	<i>Talent</i>	<i>Format</i>	<i>Tape No.</i>	<i>ERT</i>	<i>Tape</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Runtime</i>	<i>Backtime</i>
HEADLINE	2-SH	V/O	101	:15		:15	5:30:00	+14:20
OPEN	VTR	VTR		:15		:15	5:30:15	
BREAK	—	—	—	2:00	—	—		
BREAK	—	—	—	2:00	—	—		
WX INTRO	3-SH			:10				
WX	JPL			3:00				
WX OUT	3-SH			:10				
BREAK	—	—	—	2:00	—	—		
SPORTS IN	3-SH			:10				
SPORTS	JC			3:00				
SPRT OUT	3-SH			:10				
BREAK	—	—	—	2:00	—	—		
KICKER	2-SH	PKG		2:00				
CLOSE	4-SH	VTR		:30				

Note: ERT indicates estimated running time; JC and JPL, the initials of the on-air talent; PKG, package; SPRT, sports; 2-SH, 3-SH, and 4-SH, multiple anchors; V/O, voiceover; VTR, videotape recording; Wx, weather. Numbers in the ERT, Tape, Total, Runtime, and Backtime columns indicate time in minutes and seconds.

adjust show timing. Beyond assigning time, the producer does not generally worry about these segments but rather leaves them to the weather and sports directors. There might be some coordination between the departments if the situation warrants, such as in the case of severe weather or an important sports story. There is also time built into the show for the news people to introduce the weather and sports segments and for those segments to return to weather. These “pitches” are not usually scripted, but a producer must account for their time. Pitches are another good way of adjusting for timing problems in a newscast, as producers can request that anchors talk longer or shorter.

Most stations usually run a “kicker” at the end of their newscasts—a light-hearted feature story that leaves the audience with a good feeling. So much of the news is about crime, death, or other terrible things that stations want to give the audience something uplifting at the end, in the hope that it

will get the audience to come back for the next newscast. The kicker doesn't always have to be a package; it can be a short voiceover or even a reader.

Not everyone agrees with the value of a kicker. Many news directors see it as a waste of valuable air time, especially if the story isn't local. Research also indicates that when a kicker is used in a newscast, viewers rate the earlier stories in the show as less important or severe. According to the authors of the study (Zillmann, 1984), "[This] raises ethical questions about using soft news in this capacity. Is such a practice in the public interest?" Despite such concerns, the use of kicker stories is extremely common.

You'll also notice that "break" times are already in the rundown. These refer to the commercial breaks built into each show. Typically, stations will have the same number of breaks and commercial time in each show, but it can vary. That's why it's important for producers to check the station log (usually found in the traffic department or master control) to find out how many breaks are in the show and how long they last. As we have discussed, the break times are sacred in a newscast and can't be skipped, shortened, or eliminated except under extraordinary circumstances. Many producers check the commercial breaks first and make sure they're in the right places.

The information we have so far figures in the runtime and backtime columns. The show is supposed to begin at 5:30 p.m., when the show open starts. Backtiming indicates that the show is 14:20 light (+14:20). The computer has determined that given the elements already in the rundown, the show still needs more than 14 minutes of material to fill a 30-minute newscast. Barring any other changes to the rundown, the producer knows that he or she has a news hole of 14:20 to fill. As elements are added to the newscast, the backtiming figure adjusts automatically—unless the producer is not using a computer, in which case the calculations must be done by hand.

## Blocks and Stacking

Looking at our sample rundown, you can see two main areas that need to be filled. They include the segment immediately after the show open and the segment immediately before weather. These segments are generally referred to as "blocks" because they operate in much the same fashion as building blocks.

Just as the pieces in a building-block construction are all connected and support each other, the same holds true for news blocks. The idea is that the stories should be connected in some fashion and flow together logically. This means that the stories are often grouped together based on their topic, importance, or some other factor. For example, many stations make the first block of their newscast a "local news" block and the second block a "national news" block. Others might devote the entire first block to an important news topic or theme, such as a high-profile community event.

One popular blocking format is called “11 at 11,” which refers to 11 minutes of news at 11:00 p.m. These stations produce a mini newscast in the first 11 minutes of the show, complete with weather and sports. Variants include “10 at 10” and “9 at 9,” depending on when the news show begins. The idea is that the audience can get all its important information in a shorter period of time.

For the sake of our example, let’s assume that the station prefers a local news block followed by a national news block. The producer can use this framework to start putting stories in a certain order, a process called “stacking.” Interestingly, most research indicates little or no relationship between segment placement and the level of viewer interest in general. That is, audience attention does not necessarily depend on the order of the stories. Even so, producers try to stack shows in the most logical, coherent, and reasonable format possible.

There are no written rules for stacking a newscast, but producers do follow certain accepted guidelines.

### **The Most Important Stories Go First, Followed by Less Important Stories**

This guideline is a broadcast version of the newspaper “inverted pyramid,” in which stories are written with the most important information at the beginning. It is only logical that stations want to lead their newscasts with what they perceive as the most important stories of the day. This is especially important for broadcast stations, which face the growing threat of audience members switching channels if they don’t find the top story interesting.

It’s also why many stations incorporate live shots or packaged reports right at the top of the newscast. This type of coverage sends a signal to the audience that the story is important and bears following. Typically, a reporter will do a live report “on location” from the scene of the story. The reporter can give a live report, introduce a taped story, or simply conduct a live interview, depending on the needs of the producer. In some situations, especially when reporters aren’t available or in the case of breaking news, a photographer might set up a live shot that simply lets the audience see what’s happening at the scene. Someone involved with the story might be asked to answer questions from the anchors on the news desk.

Another currently popular format is to have the reporter go live from the newsroom, which carries the symbolic significance of a live shot without the technical risks of having to go on location. In reality, the reporter may be only a few feet away from the anchor desk. This raises the question of stations overusing live reporting and doing live reports even if the story itself doesn’t necessarily warrant live coverage. In fact, some news directors have a standing order that every show must have some form of live

report. There is great debate in the broadcast journalism community over live shots and what exactly constitutes good live coverage (see chapter 9). But its use continues to grow, especially as technology improves.

There are other ways to emphasize the importance of the first story without using a live report. Most lead stories involve reporter packages, and in some cases the reporter will introduce his or her own story from the news desk. A phoner might be appropriate, but again this falls into the area of live coverage. Phoners are extremely common in radio and are sometimes used by television stations when live shots aren't available.

The idea of *team coverage* has also become very popular across the country. This simply means extending the lead story by assigning more than one reporter to it. The stories all revolve around different aspects of a single topic, which ties the block together. Team coverage of a major fire in town might include stories on the fire details, the actions of the fire-fighters, the status of the victims, and so on. Team coverage is a good way of tying stories together, but it runs the risk of boring the audience. If the audience doesn't have an immediate interest in the story, it probably won't stay though the entire news block.

Even in the case of team coverage, stories can still be stacked from high importance to low importance. In the case of our fire, the story about the details of the fire would go first. In such situations, the immediate concern of the audience is to find out what happened, how it happened, and who's involved. The next logical story would probably be an update on the victims or something about the damage involved. The actions of the fire-fighters, although important, is not considered the single most important story of the block.

In our example, we're only going to devote one story to the fire and not try any team coverage. Many stations simply don't have enough reporters to devote them all to a single story, and others just don't like the concept of team coverage. A live shot might be appropriate, but there are logistical and other considerations. Can a station get a live signal from the scene of the fire? Will the fire still be going on at newstime, or will anything be happening to provide context and background for the live shot? Too many stations do live shots without consideration for what's going on behind the reporter. The result is often that the background does not help the audience understand what's going on in the story. A perfect example is a live shot done at night, where the reporter is standing in front of total darkness.

Let's assume that our fire will still be going, so the producer decides to have a live report. The reporter will be live on the scene and then introduce a package that tells the audience the important facts about the fire. The reporter can also provide updates, if information becomes available. Now we can add the first story to the first block of our rundown (Table 3.6).

**Table 3.6** First Block of Rundown

<i>Slug</i>	<i>Talent</i>	<i>Format</i>	<i>Tape No.</i>	<i>ERT</i>	<i>Tape</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Runtime</i>	<i>Backtime</i>
HEADLINE	2-SH	V/O	101	:15		:15	5:30:00	+11:50
OPEN	VTR	VTR		:15		:15	5:30:15	
FIRE	2-SH	LIVE	102	1:00	1:30	2:30	5:30:30	
BREAK	—	—	—	2:00	—	—		

Note: ERT indicates estimated running time; 2-SH, two-shot (two anchors); VTR, videotape recording. Numbers in the ERT, Tape, Total, Runtime, and Backtime columns indicate time in minutes and seconds.

The producer will have to add the appropriate information for the new story. The slug is “FIRE,” and it will be introduced by two anchors from the news desk. It is a live shot that also includes a taped package (tape no. 102). The time that the anchors talk and the reporter is actually reporting live is about 1 minute. This is a time figure that could easily change, especially if the anchors ask questions of the reporter on location, so the producer needs to try and keep it under control. The taped package runs 1:30, so the total time for the story is about 2:30.

Notice also that the story is scheduled to start at 5:30:30, so our back-timing figure has changed again. The addition of 2:30 for the “FIRE” story has reduced our news hole to +11:50, which means the producer still has to come up with almost 12 minutes of news material.

### The Stories After the Lead Should Follow in a Logical, Coherent, and Consistent Manner

There should be some relationship between stories, which means that in this case the next story should have a logical connection to the fire story. That doesn't mean that it has to be a story about another fire or even about tragedy. But the fire story has set the tone for the rest of the block—stories should be serious and important. Even if team coverage is not used, it is probably serious enough to warrant at least one related story. For example, if the fire started in an old abandoned warehouse, city safety codes might be an issue. It might be possible to get an interview with the city inspector or the person in charge of the codes.

Depending on the deadlines, the interview could be handled in a variety of ways. Let's assume that our deadline is fairly short, and we don't have time for a taped interview. The best solution might be to have the person come in for a live interview with the news anchors on the set. We can now stack another story in our first block (Table 3.7).

**Table 3.7** First Block of Rundown

<i>Slug</i>	<i>Talent</i>	<i>Format</i>	<i>Tape No.</i>	<i>ERT</i>	<i>Tape</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Runtime</i>	<i>Backtime</i>
HEADLINE	2-SH	V/O	101	:15		:15	5:30:00	+10:20
OPEN	VTR	VTR		:15		:15	5:30:15	
FIRE	2-SH	LIVE	102	1:00	1:30	2:30	5:30:30	
CODES	2-SH	SET		1:30		1:30	5:33:00	
BREAK	—	—	—	2:00	—	—		

Note: ERT indicates estimated running time; 2-SH, two-shot (two anchors); V/O, voiceover; VTR, videotape recording. Numbers in the ERT, Tape, Total, Runtime, and Backtime columns indicate time in minutes and seconds.

The story is slugged “CODES,” and it is a live interview from the news set that will take place on a two-shot with one of the anchors. There is no tape involved, and the producer has assigned a total of 1:30 for the interview. With the additional time, our backtime has changed to +10:20, indicating that we are still more than 10 minutes light. It may be that these two stories are all the resources we want to devote to this story in the newscast. There may be the potential for updates or sidebar stories in other newscasts.

### Later Stories in the Block Should Be of Similar Nature But Not Be Treated the Same Way

You can see that our station has devoted a lot of resources to the coverage of the first few stories. Live shots require engineers, reporters, photographers, and other support personnel. Except in unusual circumstances, stations can fully commit these resources to only one or two stories per newscast. That means that other stories must receive lesser treatment, using formats such as voiceovers, sound bites, or readers. These other stories must still be similar in nature to the lead stories but not treated with the same amount of depth or commitment of resources.

Depending on what other story ideas came out of the editorial meeting, the producer can go ahead and fill out the rest of the first block (Table 3.8).

The next story on the rundown is slugged “BURGLAR” and is about a burglary that took place in the area. Photographers have video footage of the scene, but the story really doesn’t warrant much more coverage than that, unless of course there are serious injuries or damages involved. “TUITION” refers to proposed tuition hike at the local college. This could be considered an important story, but, given the fire, it is downplayed in the

**Table 3.8** First Block of Rundown

<i>Slug</i>	<i>Talent</i>	<i>Format</i>	<i>Tape No.</i>	<i>ERT</i>	<i>Tape</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Runtime</i>	<i>Backtime</i>
HEADLINE	2-SH	V/O	101	:15		:15	5:30:00	+6:25
OPEN	VTR	VTR		:15		:15	5:30:15	
FIRE	2-SH	LIVE	102	1:00	1:30	2:30	5:30:30	
CODES	2-SH	SET		1:30		1:30	5:33:00	
BURGLAR	AGW	V/O	103	:30		:30	5:34:30	
TUITION	BES	VO/SOT	104	:25	:20	:45	5:35:00	
ROADS	2-SH	PKG	105	:20	1:40	2:00	5:35:45	
MAP	AGW	R/G		:25		:25	5:37:45	
TEASE-1	2-SH	V/O	106	:15		:15	5:38:10	
BREAK	—	—	—	2:00	—	—	5:39:25	

Note: AGW and BES indicate the talent's initials; ERT, estimated running time; R/G, reader-graphic; SOT, sound on tape; 2-SH, two-shot (two anchors); V/O, voiceover; VTR, videotape recording. Numbers in the ERT, Tape, Total, Runtime, and Backtime columns indicate time in minutes and seconds.

newscast. VO/SOT stands for voiceover and sound on tape, a common television news format. The anchor reads while video is running, then he or she stops for a short interview segment. At the end of the interview segment, the anchor usually concludes with a sentence or two. In this case, the interview might be with students or the dean of the college.

"ROADS" refers to a story on local road construction. This might be important to an audience for a variety of reasons, and the station has decided to run it as a package. Coming out of the package, one of the anchors will give information about specific road construction sites. R/G means "reader-graphic," an indication that the information read by the anchor will be supplemented by some sort of graphics. In this case, it's a map of road construction going on in the area. The story could be presented as a simple reader, but graphics often help audiences understand story details better.

### Don't Lose Your Audience at the End of a Block

Your newscast is competing against a multitude of other news and information programs on radio, television, and the Internet. Technology has not only increased news options, it has made it easier for audiences to avoid commercial breaks. Sophisticated home recording options such as TiVo allow audiences to record programming with no commercials at all.



Even without such sophistication, everyone has a remote control handy to click to another channel when commercials start to come on.

As the news block begins to give way to commercials, the audience has a strong temptation to change channels. This is a challenge for producers, who realize that once people click away, it's very difficult to get them to click back. The trick is to get people interested enough in the news to stay with the channel through the commercial breaks. It's also a major concern for the sales department, which is selling this air time to advertisers.

The most common solution is the news "tease," now used by almost every station in the country. Right before the commercial break, the news anchors will say a few enticing words about the upcoming stories in hopes that the audience will become interested and not change channels. These teases are usually short (in the range of 5 to 10 seconds) and try to do nothing more than pique the interest of the audience.

Writing teases (which usually falls to the producer) takes some practice. The producer should try not to give away too much information in a tease, much like a movie preview should not give away too much of the plot. If the audience learns everything it needs to know in the preview, why go see the movie? In the same way, why stick through the commercials to see a story you know everything about? On the other hand, many teases suffer from not enough information, and the audience is left with only a vague notion of what's coming up next.

Instead, teases should give enough information to arouse curiosity, which can be done in several ways. The combination of words and video can suggest certain images to the audience or play on common phrases. For example, the sports segment might include a story about how golfer Tiger Woods broke a scoring record at a certain tournament. An appropriate tease might be, "Tiger Woods keeps smashing records . . . that story coming up in sports." The tease interests the audience and creates a desire to know more information, without giving away details about the record itself.

Teases should reflect the tone of the story. That is, don't try to come up with funny, cute, or flippant teases for serious stories. Hard news stories should generally have very straightforward teases that get right to the point. A student reporter one time tried to tease the story about a fatal car-train wreck by saying, "We'll tell you about a race between a car and a train last night that ended in a tie." That is obviously inappropriate, but even when the story itself is lighter or humorous, producers should take caution—not everyone has the same sense of humor.

There is plenty of debate about the use of teases in a newscast. Some news directors think they are a waste of valuable air time and actually hurt audience retention. Most teases are accompanied by music and the phrase, "coming up," which are powerful cues to the audience that a commercial break is upcoming. However, research seems to confirm the value of news teases. Studies by Chang (1998) and Schleuder, White, and Cameron (1993) found that teases helped increase recall and comprehension of the

story being teased. Apparently, it makes no difference whether the tease is visual, verbal, or a combination of both.

### Know What Your Audience Wants

Several studies have been conducted to determine what audiences want from a newscast, and in a general sense there are certain elements of the newscast that are more appealing. Periodically, the RTNDF surveys audience members to find out this information (Table 3.9).

On the whole, you can see that audiences have a tremendous interest in such elements as weather, local crime, and the community. There is obviously less interest in such things as sports and religion. "The appetite [for sports] is 10 miles deep and a centimeter wide," says Alan Bell, president of Freedom Broadcasting (Greppi, 2002). That's an interesting way of saying that television sports fans are extremely passionate but few in numbers.

Does that mean that producers should drop or severely reduce the amount of sports coverage? Some stations have taken that extreme position, but it's more important for producers to know what's going on in their local markets. It would be foolish to reduce sports coverage in areas where sports are an important part of the local community. Stations

**Table 3.9** Interest in Local Television Elements

<i>Element</i>	<i>Viewers Expressing Interest (%)</i>
Weather	94
Local crime	91
Community events	91
Education	91
World news	88
Local government	86
Environment	86
Health and fitness	83
Sports	63
Religion	58

SOURCE: RTNDF American Radio News Audience Survey, 2000. Reprinted with permission.

in Indiana devote almost the entire month of May to coverage of the Indianapolis 500, and the Green Bay, Wisconsin, market is completely committed to the NFL's Packers. The tastes and interests of audiences vary widely from market to market, based on a variety of factors.

One such factor is geography. Different geographic regions have different interests, based on such things as topography, local industry, and the economy. Audiences in western Iowa, for example, are extremely interested in agriculture and farming, and anything that would affect these activities would be of vital interest. The Detroit area certainly has a great interest in the automotive industry, but neighboring Toledo is more concerned with the glass industry. Almost every broadcast market in the country has something to which it pays particular interest.

Interest also varies according to the time of day the newscast airs. Newscasts now run almost throughout the entire day, but the same people don't sit down to watch all of them. Each newscast has a different audience that has different interests (see Table 3.10).

Morning shows (those from 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m.) have a very specific audience—mainly men and women on their way to work, the stay-at-homes, and the elderly. Most of them have just awakened and are getting their first look at the news of the day. As a result, the news in this show needs to be reassuring and nonthreatening. People do not want death and destruction shoved in their face over their morning cornflakes.

**Table 3.10** Producing Strategies, Based on Time of Show

<i>Show</i>	<i>Audience</i>	<i>Strategies</i>	<i>Types</i>
Morning	Going to work Just woke up	Reassure Don't scare	Anchor driven Low story count "Soft news"
5:00 p.m.	Women	Use more features Less hard news	Anchor driven Longer, PKG Features Graphics
6:00 p.m.	Mass, men	Hard news Breaking news Information	Story driven Live, team coverage High story count
9:00, 10:00, 11:00 p.m.	All; older Going to bed	Updates Recapitulate, summarize Don't repeat	Anchor driven PKG, live

There are certainly situations in which the morning news shows have to deliver unhappy news, such as the terrorist bombings of September 11, 2001. But for the most part, producers of these shows try to keep things light, happy, and cheerful. Many audience members are women, and the news is often designed to appeal directly to them. This includes “softer” news stories focusing on health, self-improvement, exercise, and cooking.

Many of these programs are also “anchor driven,” in the sense that the news itself is not as important as the people delivering it. People will stick with these programs because of the anchors and their personalities and not so much for the story content. That’s a big reason morning news anchors like Katie Couric and Matt Lauer of NBC can command multimillion-dollar salaries. Producers tend to focus on the anchors and don’t try to cram too many stories into the show. *Story count* refers to the number of stories in a newscast, and morning programs tend to have lower story counts.

The 5:00 p.m. (or early afternoon) newscast is much like the morning shows, although more hard news is included. Again, the audience is primarily stay-at-home and especially female. More attention is focused on stories and issues that appeal to women, like those covered by the morning shows. The lead-in to the show also plays a part in this process. Many early afternoon news programs are directly preceded by woman-oriented shows, such as *Oprah!* or *Maury*. Thus the news in this time slot is designed to cater to the primarily female audience left over from the other shows. Oftentimes, an early afternoon newscast will pay particular attention to an issue covered in its lead-in. If *Oprah!* spends an hour talking about teenage eating disorders, the newscast might devote time to that issue on the local level.

This is not to say that these shows are devoid of hard news material; there is plenty of information presented. But in general, an early afternoon newscast is much lighter and “featurey” than other newscasts.

The 6:00 p.m. newscast is really the signature show for most stations and has the most information and hard news. Most workers have returned home by that time and are anxious to know what’s going on in their community. It’s the biggest “mass” audience for the local newscast, in the sense that it involves a wide variety of demographic groups. As a result, this newscast is more “story driven” than other shows and has a high story count. The emphasis is on information and catching people up on what they have missed during the day. The news itself is much harder and more serious.

The 6:00 p.m. show used to be the pivotal newscast of the entire day. It was “appointment” television for people interested in news. With the advent of the Internet and 24-hour cable news networks, that’s not as true anymore. People can easily find out the big stories of the day before they ever get home from work. But at least for now, this show remains the centerpiece for most broadcast stations.

The late newscast (9:00, 10:00, or 11:00 p.m., depending on the market) is more of a summary or wrap-up of what's happened during the day. Audiences don't really expect any new information, unless there's a breaking story, and simply want to get the latest information before they go to bed. Updates play a big part of this newscast, and stations also make a strong effort to offer something "new" or not seen on earlier shows. It's very important not to repeat the same stories from before, but producers simply don't have the resources to go with all new stories.

To solve this problem, most stations simply run the same stories in different formats. The fire story that was a live shot at 6:00 p.m. may be a package at 10:00 p.m. The story on road conditions that was a package at 6:00 p.m. may be cut down to a VO/SOT for the late news. In this way, producers can use much of the same material from earlier shows but present it in a slightly different version. Reporters understand that their story from the early news will have to be recut into a different version for the late news.

Even with different formats, much of the material in the late show is the same as in earlier shows. There are typically only one or two completely new packages for the late news, depending on the size of the station and its news resources. Because the audience already knows much of the information in the show, late newscasts are often anchor driven, and many times people will watch simply for the anchors. This is especially true in markets where there is little differentiation between stations in terms of news product, and it is another reason why producers should work to give the show a different feel and appearance and not make the audience feel as if the stories are simply recycled.

### Emphasize Localism

In the old days of broadcasting, most stations had captive audiences because there weren't that many news options. Those who wanted to watch television typically had three or four local channels to choose from, and local stations became important sources for local, regional, and national news. Many people got all their news from the local station.

The situation is obviously much different today. Cable, Internet, and satellite news channels make news available on a 24-hour-a-day basis. Newspaper websites can also provide audiences with important local and regional happenings. In a very practical sense, audiences don't need broadcast stations to keep up with what's going on.

That's why it's so important for local stations to emphasize local news. In many markets, a national newscast will immediately precede local news, not only giving audiences plenty of national coverage but doing it better than a local newscast could. Local stations must give local audiences a

reason to tune in, and that means focusing on stories and issues important in the community. This doesn't mean that there can't be national news material in a local newscast, and audiences do expect stations to update them on important stories outside their market. But on the whole, producers cannot make national material the focus of local news programming and expect audiences to pay attention.

### Make Your Show Interactive

One way of emphasizing localism is to make your newscast more interactive. Broadcasting has traditionally been a one-way communication process, in which the station sends out information and the audience passively receives it. But developments in technology have now allowed the audience to take a more active role in news.

Many stations have experimented with getting their audiences more involved through such things as viewer polls, contests, and other lines of feedback. The growth of cell phone use has made it possible for stations to put listeners at the scene of breaking news directly on the air. The Internet has been very useful in making news more interactive in a variety of ways. The most obvious is that audiences can now directly e-mail stations with story ideas, feedback on stories, and suggestions. Most news organizations now have websites that update audiences on important news and give them an opportunity to contribute their opinions. How much of this has any direct impact on the station's news product is unknown, but it does give the audience more of a stake in the newscast (for more on producing news for the Internet, see chapter 7).

### Push the Envelope, But Realize Your Limitations

We have discussed the fact that news coverage depends largely on the station's resources. These resources can be technical, such as cameras, microphones and live trucks, or they can be human resources, such as reporters, photographers, editors, and the like. One of the primary jobs of a producer is to use these resources to put together the best possible newscast.

"Pushing the envelope" means nothing more than maximizing the available resources to cover the most news. Too many times, producers prefer to play it safe and do things the easy way. However, playing it safe does not always work in an era of increased competition and more news options. Chances are, other stations are trying to do things bigger and better and take away your audience.

How does a producer maximize resources? In a number of ways. If a reporter and photographer have to make a long drive out of town to cover a story, could they possibly pick up any other news in that area? Is there another story close by that they could get? Maybe the sports department is covering a game in that area, and a sports person could pick up the news story. In this way, producers have additional resources to use somewhere else.

Are there other news outlets that could help in story coverage? Many stations use stringers or interns for this purpose, although their contribution is usually limited. But stations often enlist the help of other stations (although not competing stations in their own market) in covering stories. Each station might contribute something to a joint effort that allows both stations to have better coverage than they would have had alone. For example, when a school shooting rocked Paducah, Kentucky, in 1997, stations from all across the Midwest converged on the city. Local stations affiliated with the same network worked together in coordinated coverage, and their “pooling” of resources allowed them to cover the story in much greater depth.

However, there is a danger in pushing the envelope too far. All resources, whether technical or human, have limits. It would be foolish, for example, to count on a live shot if the distance or weather conditions involved are prohibitive. Reporters aren’t just resources to be moved around at will; they’re also human beings who can suffer from overwork, fatigue, and frustration. It would not be very productive to take a reporter who has been working all day on a difficult story and reassign him or her to a completely different story later in the afternoon. Sometimes these things must happen, such as in the case of breaking news, but they should not be done on a consistent basis. A good producer realizes the limitations of the available resources and plans the show accordingly.

### Think “Big Picture”

There’s no doubt that blocking, stacking, rundowns, and story formats are important considerations for producers, but sometimes it’s easy to miss the forest for the trees. A producer who gets wrapped up in the little details of producing may miss the bigger picture: producing an effective and engaging newscast.

A well-produced newscast is more than just the sum of its technical parts; it involves teamwork, coordination, critical decision making, and flexibility. Good blocking and stacking are important, but by themselves they do not make for a successful show. Some of the most interesting newscasts are done “by the seat of the pants” and seem to come together only at the last minute. By contrast, many shows that are blocked and stacked well fall flat with the audience.

### Things Viewers Never, Ever Say

Steve Safran is the executive producer of New England Cable News and contributes to *Lost Remote* (<http://www.lostremote.com>). He says that many of the things producers get in arguments about—sometimes very heated arguments—are just stupid because the audience never even considers them. Safran says the following list of what “viewers never, ever say” illustrates how producers need to reconnect with their audiences.

- “They went: package, VO, package, SOT. Wouldn’t it have been so much better if they had gone: package, VO, SOT package?”
- “Margaret! They’re going to give me the details of that man wanted in the downtown robbery. Get me a pen!”
- “The police want *my* help in solving this crime? Cool!”
- “One person was slightly injured in that accident? Good thing they had a helicopter there.”
- “That thing that happened half a world away? I hope this local newscast tells me if it could happen here.”
- “Good thing they ran that voiceover of people putting on seatbelts during that seatbelt law story. I had no idea what seatbelts looked like.”
- “They’re leading with the same story at 5:30 as they did at 5? Booooooring!”
- “Oh, they’re *live* at the State House. There was no way I was going to believe a prepackaged story about the budget.”
- “No, I *hadn’t* recalled that *Action News* first told me about this story last week. Thanks for the reminder!”
- “It’s gonna snow/be hot/be very cold? I sure hope they’ll tell me what to do with my pets and older relatives. I have no idea.”
- “Wait! Wait! What happened to the anchor I’m used to watching? He’s not there tonight! Is he dead? Oh, thank God . . . he’s on assignment.”
- “*Team* coverage? Now I’m watching!”

SOURCE: Safran (2003).

## Finishing Strong

Let’s keep these things in mind as we go ahead and fill out our example rundown (Table 3.11). We still have to finish the national news block, which, obviously, depends on the important stories of the day and what



**Table 3.11** Completed News Rundown

<i>Slug</i>	<i>Talent</i>	<i>Format</i>	<i>Tape No.</i>	<i>ERT</i>	<i>Tape</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Runtime</i>	<i>Backtime</i>
HEADLINE	2-SH	V/O	101	:15		:15	5:30:00	+0:20
OPEN	VTR	VTR		:15		:15	5:30:15	
FIRE	2-SH	LIVE	102	1:00	1:30	2:30	5:30:30	
CODES	2-SH	SET		1:30		1:30	5:33:00	
BURGLAR	AGW	V/O	103	:30		:30	5:34:30	
TUITION	BES	VO/SOT	104	:25	:20	:45	5:35:00	
ROADS	2-SH	PKG	105	:20	1:40	2:00	5:35:45	
MAP	AGW	R/G		:25		:25	5:37:45	
TEASE-1	2-SH	V/O	106	:15		:15	5:38:10	
BREAK	—	—	—	2:00	—	—	5:38:25	
IRAQ	2-SH	PKG	107	:15	1:30	1:45	5:40:25	
N KOREA	AGW	VO/SOT	108	:30	:20	:50	5:42:10	
CRASH	BES	V/O	109	:25		:25	5:43:00	
ELECTION	BES	SOT	110	:15	:15	:30	5:43:25	
ECONOMY	AGW	R/G		:20		:20	5:43:55	
TEASE-2	2-SH	V/O	111	:15		:15	5:44:15	
BREAK	—	—	—	2:00	—	—	5:44:30	
WX INTRO	3-SH			:10		:10	5:46:30	
WX	JPL			3:00		3:00	5:46:40	
WX OUT	3-SH			:10		:10	5:49:40	
TEASE-3	BES			:15		:15	5:49:50	
BREAK	—	—	—	2:00	—	—	5:50:05	
SPORTS IN	3-SH			:10		:10	5:52:05	
SPORTS	JC			3:00		3:00	5:52:15	
SPRT OUT	3-SH			:10		:10	5:55:15	
TEASE-4	AGW			:15		:15	5:55:25	
BREAK	—	—	—	2:00	—	—	5:55:40	
KICKER	2-SH	PKG	112	:15	1:15	1:30	5:57:40	
CLOSE	4-SH	VTR		:30		:30	5:59:10	

Note: AGW, BES, JC, and JPL indicate the talent's initials; ERT, estimated running time; R/G, reader-graphic; SOT, sound on tape; SPRT, sports; 2-SH, 3-SH, and 4-SH, multiple anchors; VO and V/O, voiceover; VTR, videotape recording. Numbers in the ERT, Tape, Total, Runtime, and Backtime columns indicate time in minutes and seconds.

material we're getting from our national newsfeeds. Almost all national news material will come from the wires and network newsfeeds. Many stations subscribe to more than one newsfeed, usually their own network's feed and that of some other independent news provider.

We've filled out our rundown with national stories on Iraq, North Korea, an election, and the economy. The economy story is a reader-graphic indicating the final business averages of the day and any stocks of local interest. We've also added our teases, which come at the end of each block, and the actual time of our kicker package. There's no sports or weather material yet, but those departments will take care of that. Because most weather segments are unscripted, that part usually stays as just one line in the rundown.

You can also see how our runtime columns are now all filled, indicating at what exact clock time each story in the show should air. It's important to realize that very few stories actually go on the air at their scheduled time, for a variety of reasons. Stories might not be ready, reporters might be running late, or a tape machine might break down. Producers will have to make adjustments for these problems during the show.

Notice also that our backtime figure is now +0:20, which means the show is 20 seconds light. As we've discussed, it's probably better for a producer to go into a show light rather than heavy because extra time allows for the problems that inevitably occur. It's much easier to add material to a show than to dump material, and producers can also have the anchors take up more time with "happy talk" on the set. Using credits (a graphic list of the news personnel who work on the show) is another device producers have to adjust for time. If the show runs light, the producer can have credits run at the end. If it's on time or running heavy, the credits can easily be dropped.

Obviously, not every news show will follow this rundown, and there are dozens of different formats available for a producer to use. Some will vary in the use of teases, and others may use an "11 at 11" format. Still, this rundown can give you an idea of how producers put shows together. Formats may differ, but the process of building a news show is fairly standard.

## Scripting

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Once a rundown has been completed (and sometimes even before), the producer can begin work on creating individual story scripts. The script has the actual words that will be read on the air, along with important information for the technical director. As with the rundown, everyone connected with the newscast needs a copy of every story script. This includes the producer, anchors, studio personnel, and technical crew. All of these people must be made aware of any changes to the script, which happens quite often.

There are two important parts to a television script. Think of it as a piece of paper with an imaginary line running down the center from top

**Table 3.12** Sample Television Package Script

BES	STARTING NEXT YEAR, IT WILL COST A LOT
Cam-1	MORE TO GO TO SCHOOL AT STATE
	UNIVERSITY. JOHN SMITH REPORTS THAT
	TOUGH ECONOMIC TIMES HAVE LED THE
	STATE BOARD OF TRUSTEES TO RAISE
	TUITION RATES.
TAKE PKG	
Length: 1:30	
CG: State College/:02	
CG: Jim Johnson, Dean/:15	
CG: Stacy Jones, Student/:40	
CG: John Smith, Reporting/1:15	
OUTQ: Standard	

Note: BES indicates the talent's initials; Cam-1, camera 1; CG, character generator; OUTQ, outcue; TAKE PKG, roll tape. Numbers indicates times in minutes and seconds.

to bottom. All information on the left-hand side is for the technical director; all the information on the right-hand side is words the anchors will read on the air (see Table 3.12).

There is certain technical information that must be included on the left side of the script. In Table 3.12, "BES" refers to the anchor reading the story, and "Cam-1" indicates on which camera the anchor will appear. This tells the technical director who is reading the story and what camera is involved.

"TAKE PKG" lets the director know there is a tape involved with the story and when to roll it. Different stations use different notations for this, such as "roll," "take" or "cue," but the purpose is the same. The time listed (1:30) tells the director how long the tape lasts, so he or she knows when to go back to the anchor. "OUTQ" stands for "outcue" and refers to the last two or three words of the tape. This lets the director know exactly when to exit the story. In this case, the outcue is "standard," which means the reporter will end the story with a standard phrase like, "This is John Smith reporting for News 12."

It's especially important to let the director know when the outcue is nonstandard. Another problem can arise if the last few words of a non-standard outcue are repeated, such as in the case of a SOT that ends with, "The damage caused by the fire is terrible, just terrible." If the outcue is listed as "terrible," the director might be tempted to cut out of the story after he hears the first mention of the word. Most stations get around this

problem by writing “FALSE OUTQ,” which lets the director know to wait until he or she hears the outcue a second time.

“CG” stands for character generator, which refers to any printed material on the screen. It may also be referred to as *chyrons* or *supers*. Typically, this is graphic information that shows someone’s name or identifies a certain location. In this example, there are four CGs that need to be used in the story. The producer will have to indicate the exact CGs and the times they appear in the story.

Traditionally, CG information has been loaded into the show by a graphics specialist. A producer might give a list of all the CGs that appear in the newscast to the chyron operator, who then types them on separate pages. At appropriate times during the show, the director will call for the chyron operator to display the right CG. However, new computer software has made the CG process much easier. Some programs allow the producer or reporter to directly type their chyrons right into the script, eliminating the need for a CG operator. In either event, careful attention must be paid to CG spellings and times.

Even when stories vary by format, the information the technical director needs rarely changes. The director certainly wants to know if a story requires some sort of special technical direction. But whether the story is a live shot, package, interview, or something else, the director must have certain basic information on each script, as shown in Tables 3.13 and 3.14.

The right side of the script deals strictly with material that will be read on the air, and it is, obviously, the part that interests the anchors and news readers the most. You may have noticed that scripts are usually typed in all capitals and double spaced. This keeps the anchors from losing their place and makes it easier for them to see the words in the teleprompter.

The teleprompter is a device, usually attached to the studio camera, which allows anchors to read the scripts. When the anchors look into the camera, they’re actually looking at the scripts. The scripts roll by at a certain speed, either determined by the anchor or by someone running a teleprompter machine. Years ago, stations had to use teleprompter machines in which the scripts were taped together and then rolled on a conveyor belt. Modern technology has virtually eliminated this process by attaching the teleprompter to a computer. Many anchors can now control the teleprompter themselves, by using a foot pedal that feeds the scripts at an appropriate speed.

In addition to double spacing and typing in capitals, there are other ways producers can help make the anchors’ jobs easier. Words that are hard to pronounce should be written phonetically, and producers should point them out in advance. Some common print conventions, such as decimal points and figures, should be written out. For example, instead of “THE BUDGET INCREASED TO \$2.5 MILLION,” the broadcast script should read, “THE BUDGET INCREASED TO 2-POINT-5 MILLION DOLLARS.” Producers should always remember that everything they write will have to be read on the air.

**Table 3.13** Sample Television Voiceover Script

BES	STARTING NEXT YEAR, IT WILL COST A LOT
Cam-1	MORE TO GO TO SCHOOL AT STATE
	UNIVERSITY.
TAKE V/O	
CG: State College/:02	TODAY, THE STATE BOARD OF TRUSTEES
	ANNOUNCED A TUITION HIKE OF THREE
	PERCENT. THAT WILL COST THE AVERAGE
	STUDENT AN EXTRA ONE HUNDRED
	DOLLARS PER SEMESTER. UNIVERSITY
	DEAN JIM JOHNSON SAID A POOR STATE
	ECONOMY AND DECLINING ENROLLMENT
	FORCED THE DECISION. THE TUITION
	INCREASE WILL GO INTO EFFECT FOR THE
	FALL SEMESTER.

Note: BES indicates the talent's initials; Cam-1, camera 1; CG, character generator; TAKE V/O, roll tape for voiceover. Number indicates time in seconds.

Producers should also be ready to change a script at a moment's notice. This includes not only the content of the script but the show order. Computing software has made it possible to make changes that instantly appear in the rundown. For example, if a breaking news story needs to be inserted into a newscast, the producer can quickly write it and then add it in the appropriate place. The other stories will automatically drop down behind it, and the computer will adjust the time. Anchors will then be able to read the story on the air, although they may not have the luxury of having seen it before or having a paper copy of the script.

Much of the challenge of producing lies in these types of changes, because each newscast will probably go through numerous revisions and updates. Producers must be flexible enough to handle change on short notice and incorporate it into the show. Many of these changes take place in a matter of minutes while the show is already on the air.

**Table 3.14** Sample Television Voiceover and Sound on Tape Script

BES Cam-1	STARTING NEXT YEAR, IT WILL COST A LOT MORE TO GO TO SCHOOL AT STATE UNIVERSITY.
TAKE V/O CG: State College/:02	TODAY, THE STATE BOARD OF TRUSTEES ANNOUNCED A TUITION HIKE OF THREE PERCENT. THAT WILL COST THE AVERAGE STUDENT AN EXTRA ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS PER SEMESTER. UNIVERSITY DEAN JIM JOHNSON SAID A POOR STATE ECONOMY AND DECLINING ENROLLMENT FORCED THE DECISION.
SOT Length: 16 CG: Jim Johnson/:15 OUTQ: "tough decision"	
BACK TO V/O	THE TUITION INCREASE WILL GO INTO EFFECT FOR THE FALL SEMESTER

Note: BES indicates the talent's initials; Cam-1, camera 1; CG, character generator; OutQ, outcue; SOT, sound on tape; TAKE V/O, roll tape for voiceover. Numbers indicate time in minutes and seconds.

## In the Control Room

For several reasons, the producer watches the newscast from the control room. It gives the producer direct access to the director and other control room personnel, which makes quick changes to the show possible. If a story needs to be dropped, moved, or changed, the producer can immediately notify the director. Watching from the control room also helps the producer look for potential problems. If a tape is late coming in or a machine breaks down, the producer can instantly make a decision about what to do next.



**Figure 3.3** Producers Watch the Newscast From the Control Room

To make quick changes and decisions, producers remain in the control room during the newscast. They usually sit or stand behind the technical director, with whom they keep in constant contact.

SOURCE: Photo by Brad Schultz.

Making these kinds of critical decisions on the fly is the main priority of the producer during the newscast. Sometimes producers have only seconds to adjust a newscast when problems arise. Suppose a reporter calls in from a live shot to let the producer know that the interview subject hasn't shown up yet. Does the producer drop the live shot to later in the show or keep it in the same place in the hope that the person will get there on time? Is there someone else at the scene who could speak instead, or should the reporter forget the interview and do the live shot alone? A producer may make dozens of these decisions during the course of a newscast, and there's really no way to determine a right or wrong decision ahead of time. In such situations, producers base their decisions on a variety of factors, most notably experience and news judgment.

You can see that during the show, producers have to keep in constant communication with other members of the newscast. The producer has direct access to the director and other control room personnel but must also indicate any changes to anchors and studio workers. These people are usually hooked up to an interruptible frequency broadcast (IFB), which allows the producer to talk to them at any point during the show. Anchors wear

custom-made earpieces that connect them to the IFB, and studio personnel usually listen on headsets. The IFB allows the producer to announce changes to all the affected people, sometimes even as the changes are happening.

The producer's other main job during the newscast is timing. Producers should keep fairly tight control over the timing of a newscast and try to stick to the rundown. When problems do arise, or the show's timing falls off schedule for some other reason, the producer makes adjustments to keep the show on track. As previously noted, this is most often done by lengthening or shortening certain segments within the newscast, dropping or adding news material, or telling the anchors to speed up or slow down. Some producers build in a certain amount of time for "happy talk," where the anchors simply chit-chat with each other. This is an obvious place to modify the timing of the show, if necessary.

The producer usually has to make sure that the newscast ends at a specific time. Once the show is over, many stations will bring all the newscast crew together for a critique. This provides immediate feedback about what worked, what went wrong, and what needs changing in upcoming shows. Generally, the critique is done at the discretion of the news director, who may do it in person or post a written version. Unfortunately, many stations do not spend much time on critiques. Once the newscast ends, all energy is focused toward getting ready for the next show—that's the nature of the news business.

### News Producing: Matt Ellis

Matt Ellis has spent nearly 20 years in television news, much of that time as a newscast producer. He started as a reporter at WVVA in Bluefield, West Virginia, but eventually moved over to producing. After stops in Buffalo, Tampa, Boston, and Providence, he landed in New York—first as executive producer for WCBS and eventually as head writer for ABC's *Good Morning America*. He's now the news director at WBZ-TV in Boston.

*Q: What are the duties of a news producer?*

*A:* A news producer for a local television station is the architect of the program. He or she is responsible for choosing the content, slotting the stories, and writing much of the copy. The producer also oversees the



Matt Ellis, News Director,  
WBZ-TV, Boston



presentation of the broadcast from the control room. News producers possess a number of skills. Chief among them is the ability to take the facts of an incident and turn them into a story that is clear, concise, and compelling. News producers are constantly making decisions, and their judgment is regularly tested. Any good producer is organized, smart, and well read. It is also helpful to know the community and its history.

*Q: What are the difficulties associated with producing in today's environment?*

A: As television stations continue to struggle with finite resources, cable competition, and a loyal viewer base that is continually aging, producers are under more and more pressure to jazz up the news. Any news director will tell you that accuracy can never be sacrificed, but a newscast devoid of style is a failure. In recent years, the use of splashy electronic graphics has enhanced the packaging and promotion of the news. Indeed, news promotion is now seen as a critical component of any successful operation. Many news managers will joke that it doesn't matter how great a story or a broadcast is if the viewers aren't watching. With remote controls within every viewer's grasp, managers make sure producers are including stories that have promotional value and marketing them properly. Any good news producer is also a good tease writer.

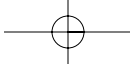
*Q: What is the main satisfaction you get from producing?*

A: Producers spend many hours planning and creating their newscast, and few things offer the satisfaction of a well-timed, well-executed broadcast. There is a definite adrenaline rush a producer feels in the control room when the show hits on all cylinders. A good newscast has a rhythm; it feels good. And while it is truly a team effort, it is the producer who is the team captain, pulling together the elements and creating the game plan that ultimately transforms raw information into a polished product. That said, it is worth noting that some of the best newscasts are the ones where the script and rundown get tossed aside and the team responds to breaking news. That is perhaps the best adrenaline rush of all, producing on the go and knowing that you have tested the limits of yourself and your team to win the big story.

SOURCE: Matt Ellis (personal communication, April 2003)

## Thinking More About It

Consider taping a series of local newscasts for a content analysis (for more information on content analysis, see "Thinking More About It" at the end of chapter 2). Analyze the newscasts and consider the following:



1. How are the shows blocked and stacked? Did the blocking and stacking affect your perception of the show? Were the shows that you considered well blocked and stacked “good” newscasts? Why or why not?
2. What type of organization or order is used that holds the show together? Did the show seem to flow together well, or did it seem disjointed? Over a series of nights, did the newscast have the same general order and structure?
3. What formats are most commonly used to cover the most important stories? How much time was allotted to the most important stories?
4. How does the newscast at one station compare to another local station? Did the shows look the same? Did they generally cover the same stories? If so, did they use the same formats or give the stories a different treatment?
5. Could you detect any places in the show where it looked like late changes had been made (for example, to insert breaking news)? Did the change cause any on-air problems?
6. How often do anchors read off their scripts compared to using the teleprompter?

