

# Aim for the Heart

*“I quite agree with you,” said the Duchess, “and the moral of that is—‘Be what you would seem to be’—or if you’d like it put more simply—‘Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise.’”*

*“I think I should understand that better,” Alice said very politely, “if I had it written down: but I can’t quite follow it as you say it.”*

*“That’s nothing to what I could say if I chose,” the Duchess replied, in a pleased tone.*

—Lewis Carroll,  
*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

Great stories hang in the viewer’s ear and catch the viewer’s eye. Great stories aim straight for the viewer’s heart. The best news stories don’t just inform: They teach, illuminate and inspire viewers.

As a reporter and later as a newscast producer, I feared that my viewers would be as confused and unable to decipher what I was saying as Alice is in the passage at the beginning of this chapter. At the end of a story, I wanted viewers to say, “Aha!” not “Huh?”

Before I write news stories, I glance at a simple little checklist I have kept for years. The list was written by former WSMV-TV news director and, later, general manager Mike Kettenring. After he left a long career in television, Kettenring became a Catholic priest, so it is no surprise that the checklist is built around the word “faith.”

Fair

Accurate

Interesting

Thorough

Human

Have faith that the power of great storytelling will connect with the viewer’s heart.

The checklist keeps stories from sounding like Sgt. Joe Friday on the TV show *Dragnet*. When Sergeant Friday was on the case, he would say, “Just the facts, ma’am.”

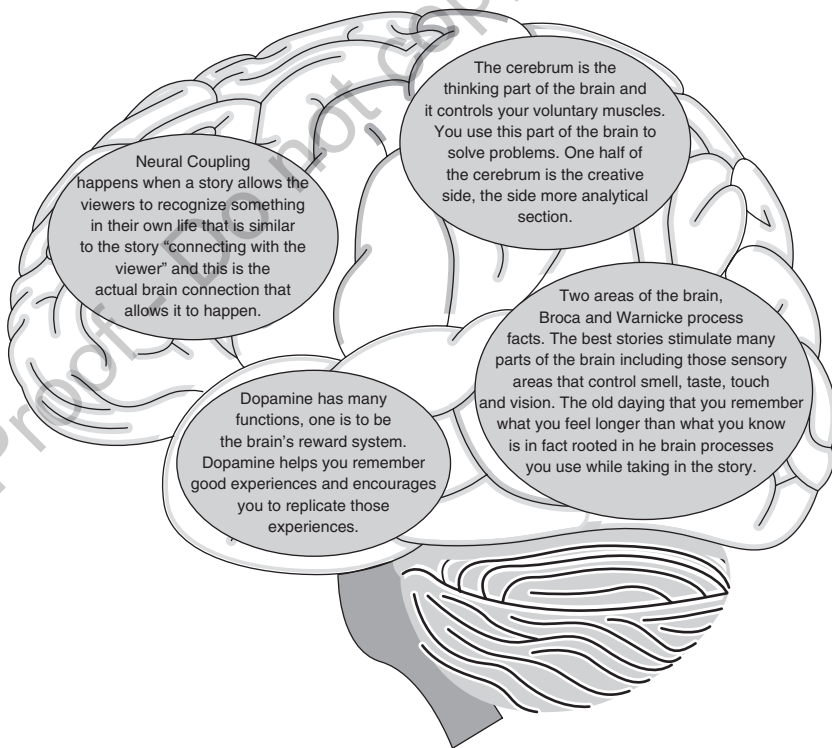
News writing can be “just the facts.” But the difference between *fact* telling and *storytelling* is the difference between watching the stock ticker and hearing a story about an elderly woman who has lost every dime she needs for shelter and medicine because the market just tanked.

Storytelling has such power over us that it affects key regions of your brain. The words you read and hear even trigger responses in your brain if the writer uses metaphorical language—language that paints a picture, creates a link to something that is familiar to the audience. Emory University researchers reported in the research journal *Brain and Language* that when the writer uses such words as “She had a bubbly personality,” the reader’s sensory cortex, a part of the brain that senses touch, lights up. But bland descriptions such as “She had a lively personality” did not produce the same brain response.<sup>1</sup> Write the phrase “He fluffed his lines” and you are likely to get more brain response than “He forgot his lines.” And “That man is oily” is more likely to produce greater sensory cortex response than “That man is untrustworthy.”<sup>2</sup> Other researchers have found that the mere mention of the word “perfume” can light up the olfactory cortex, the part of the brain that senses smell.<sup>3</sup>

Researchers are also learning that storytelling seems to have the power to help humans become more understanding, more empathetic and more open to new ideas. One study said schoolchildren who had more stories read to them had a wider “theory of mind,” which is the ability to understand other people’s intentions. It turns out when you read to young children, you are not just expanding their vocabulary; you are teaching them to think. Stories connect deeply in our brains in ways raw facts cannot.

A British website, [stayingaliveuk.com](http://stayingaliveuk.com), helps clients “tell their stories” by turning facts into whiteboard animations. Part of the site’s pitch includes this graphic describing how storytelling affects the human brain. The website tries to convince potential clients that the way to deeply connect with customers is to tell them a story. And it turns out that the advice is based on some pretty compelling science that has been building for decades.

The graphic shows four key activities that unfold when the listener/viewer/reader takes in a well-told story that connects intellectually and



emotionally. The part of the brain known as Broca's area controls speech production. Wernicke's area handles how we understand the written and spoken word. (Both Pierre Paul Broca and Carl Wernicke were neuroscientists.) When you read a boring textbook (not this one) or watch a professor's bland PowerPoint lecture, you use these two areas of the cortex. But when the professor really fires up his or her creativity or when the writer uses descriptive language, other parts of your brain light up and you begin connecting with the information in surprisingly deep and memorable ways. Why? Because you are experiencing the story in ways that connect with your senses beyond your Broca's and Wernicke's areas. How cool is that?

Psychologists have a phrase for this connection: "narrative transport." The story transports the audience and connects consumers to their own experiences.

That brings us to the upper left portion of the graphic, which is another "wow." A Princeton research researcher named Uri Hasson discovered that when the storyteller powerfully connects with the listener, they actually "connect." There is something called neural coupling that shows up on an MRI scan of the brain. When the listener doesn't understand or doesn't care what the speaker is saying, the coupling vanishes.<sup>4</sup>

Let's apply all of this theory to a commercial to see how in just 30 seconds a brand such as Nike can aim for the heart by connecting with your emotions, stimulating your brain and selling you stuff.

The commercial features pro golfer Rory McIlroy, a golf sensation who at age 22 set records at the U.S. Open and PGA Championship. By the time he was 23, he had earned \$10 million. He made it all look so easy. Nike could have shown this golfer wearing Nike gear and using Nike clubs and just told the viewer to buy stuff like Rory uses. That's not what the company did. Nike tapped into the mindset of an athlete or a wannabe athlete.

The gritty commercial shows Rory's alarm going off at 5:30 each morning. He lifts weights, runs by himself down secluded rocky roads, stuffs vegetables into a blender and chokes down the green glob it produces each morning. Then he hits practice range golf balls into the dark of night, and he does it again when the alarm goes off at 5:30 the next day. Day after day, his story is about sweat and perseverance. The ad ends

with him teeing off at a PGA tournament, the crowd roaring in awe, and the message appears: “Nike. Enjoy the Chase.”

That’s a story. That’s the kind of story that Nike could expect would connect emotionally with anybody who has chased a dream and paid the cost. As Vanderbilt Professor Jennifer Edson Escalas, who studies the psychology of advertising narratives puts it:

*While some attention may occasionally be paid to features and benefits, the bigger picture in Nike ads revolves around a story of hard work, sweat, and perseverance; the result of the story is that Nike enables people to achieve their very best. Thus, Nike’s story is about enabling consumers to achieve their personal quest for excellence. This story resonates with Nike’s target consumers, who are athletic, fitness conscious individuals. Using Nike sports gear, the consumer can build his/her own personal story of accomplishment.<sup>5</sup>*

## **CAN GREAT STORYTELLING MAKE YOU SEXIER?**

And, get this: One study found that men’s ability to tell stories “affects their attractiveness and perceived status.”<sup>6</sup> If you learn to tell great stories, people may find you to be more attractive. One study found, “Individuals who can create compelling stories may be more persuasive and thus be able to influence others and gain social standing.”<sup>7</sup>

And here’s some good news for television and online video storytellers. The brain connections increase when the viewer can see the “meaningful” gestures that the storyteller makes telling the tale.<sup>8</sup>

At the risk of sounding like a late-night infomercial, I want to shout, “But wait, there’s more.” Storytelling is one of the qualities that separates us, so far as we know, from other species. Story narratives help us make sense of what is happening around us. They give our experiences order and perspective. When something newsworthy happens, we tend to want to know why, how, who it affected, and what came before and after. We want to know more than the factual “what happened” to get the “so what,” which I would argue is the story beyond that facts.

This hunger for story has held true in every known culture from Sanskrit to Greek and Latin. The walls of Egyptian tombs and cave dwellings are covered with stories, not just facts. It's as though we are wired for stories. No child ever went to bed saying, "Daddy, read me some facts." It's as if we are prewired to want to hear stories. We want conflict and characters. We want context and resolution. Nobody told you the elements of a great story when you were a toddler, but you knew a great story when you heard one. In fact, if you were anything like my kids, you wanted to hear a great story over and over. The dopamine was flowing. Multiple cortexes fired up. Now we know why: We were making a neural coupling!

## **ALL THAT IS GREAT, BUT I'M ON A DEADLINE**

I can almost hear TV reporters and producers protest, "Yea, Al, great. But we do TV. Our bosses want us to write short and tight. You can't be compelling and factual in a minute and 20 seconds."

It's not true. This whole book is about proving that.

Mark Twain, Dorothy Parker, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Edgar Allan Poe, Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck learned their craft by writing short stories. They all learned what broadcast journalists know: It is more difficult to write an interesting and contextually complete short story than it is to write a longer version of the story.<sup>9</sup>

French mathematician, physicist and philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote in a letter to a friend in 1657: "I have made this letter longer, because I have not had the time to make it shorter."<sup>10</sup>

With only a few words, the writer creates a hook and a complication, provides surprises, information and character development. On television, that hook (a) captures viewers' attention, (b) brings them up to speed and (c) leads them toward what is new in the story. Even in a 20-second story there should be at least one main character, tension and resolution.

Television stories and newscasts should tell tales, spin yarns, provide people with information they need to understand the world and teach viewers something they didn't know to keep them coming back.

This chapter will help you tackle those complex stories and tell them in a way that goes straight to the viewer’s heart. In this chapter we will cover:

- How to find a tight story focus that connects to the viewer’s heart
- How to use sound bites to reach the viewer’s heart

## **FINDING FOCUS: AIM FOR THE HEART OF THE STORY**

Anyone who has ever written a news story, a college term paper or even a second-grade class assignment knows how hard it is to find a tight focus for the story. Aiming for the heart of the story is essential to good storytelling.

My daughter MeiLin is a journalist. I should have known she would become a writer. When she was in second grade, she wrote a story for a class assignment called “My Luckiest Day.” This 99-word tale is a clear example of what writers go through when they struggle to find a tight focus for a story. Watch what this young writer does right in the middle of the story to correct the course of a straying narrative. (I will include the spelling and punctuation she used for added flavor.)

“My Luckiest Day Ever”

MeiLin Tompkins, Second Grade

Lakeview Elementary School

My luckies day ever is today because my friend Kenna is coming to my house! Kenna lives in Tennesse and I think it is my luckies day ever because she is my best friend and she likes it when I’m funny and so do I!

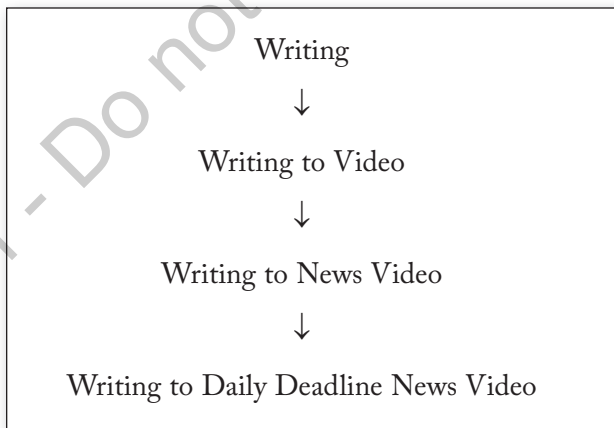
And I think I might want glasses not really but never mind about that because I’m spost to be talking about my friend Kenna will I can’t wait tell she comes to my house to play fun games and watch TV and have some pop corn. I can’t wait tell she comes!

My life as a journalist would have been so much easier if at age eight I could have learned what my daughter learned: Great writing is a process of selecting, not compressing, what goes into our stories.

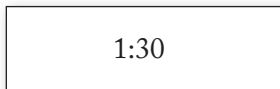
As a reporter, I have found myself in the middle of a convoluted story, writing a sentence that sounded exactly like my daughter when she wrote, “Never mind about that—because I’m spost to be talking about . . .” Journalism is an endless process of editing out information and details.

The single most important question a writer can ask before he or she begins to type is, “What is this story about?” This book, for example, could have been about writing, but that would have been a broad book about all kinds of storytelling, from folktales to fairy tales to news writing. A book about writing might have covered how to write instructional manuals, technical documents and scientific journals.

This book could have been about broadcast writing, but that book might have covered everything from writing for sitcoms to documentaries. Instead, I chose to talk directly to people who write news stories. I have narrowed the focus. It is the first step in writing more powerful stories. Here is how my decision-making might look:



I sometimes think of stories as shapes. Think for a minute about your story as being a 1-minute 30-second box. Your box could look like this:





Or it could look like this:



The first box is the shape of a headline newscast. It would give you a lot of facts and details but would not drill down on any of them. It contains a little bit of information about a wide range of things. But the second box is narrow and deep. It focuses on a narrow subject.

News stories work best when they are narrow and deep, not wide and thin. Don't try to cram every detail you know into your story. Select, don't compress. Focus and get narrow. It usually means you will need fewer characters in your stories, but viewers will get to know the characters you include.

Teachers often tell students to get to the who, what, when, where, why and how of the story. How do you know if you have done that?

- The “who” is/are your main character(s).
- The “what” is the main action that affected the character(s).
- The “when” and “where” tell viewers about the setting, both in time and place.
- “Why” and the “how” set the story's context. This usually is the most newsworthy part of the story. Anybody can tell me what happened, but it takes a journalist to tell me how and why it happened.

## THE FOCUS STATEMENT: THREE WORDS

By telling narrower but deeper stories, writers help viewers understand information more clearly. This process of finding focus is really about simplifying the story. To focus a story, the writer must fully understand it.

Here is a checklist that will help you start finding focus:

- What is the most interesting part about this story? (This is the main thrust of the story.)
- What surprised me? (This may be the lead.)
- What did I learn that I didn't know before? (This is a main surprise, which we usually put early in the story.)
- What will viewers want to know? In what order will they ask those questions? (This will determine the story frame.)
- What do I want viewers to remember and feel at the end of this story? (This is the most memorable sound bite.)
- What comes next? (This will lead you toward the end of the story.)
- Those details will help you answer the key question that will focus your story: "What is this story about?"

The answer should not be a long-winded account of all you know. Try to answer the question in one sentence.

Jon Franklin, a two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, says writers should craft a focus statement about their story. The "focus statement," Franklin says, "should be three words in length." (You can get away with a free "an," "and" or "the.") Think of it as "who did what?"

Let's try out this idea.

Few stories have more complexities hidden in them than stories about war. The list of the possible stories we could do includes:

- The generals
- The soldiers
- The civilians left at home
- The conflict involved
- The weapons
- The president in wartime
- The foreign policies that led to the fighting
- The history of the nations involved

- The strategy
- The diplomacy to end the fighting

It is tempting to believe that the most compelling war stories involve lots of shooting and bombing. People who have never been in a war may not understand what soldiers do. War is mostly not about shooting and bombing. It is about mind-numbing boredom and routine intermingled with moments of terror and adrenaline, followed by more tedious grunt work and sleep deprivation. To get to the real story of war, you have to get down to the level of the soldier. Everything the presidents, the diplomats and the generals do affects soldiers on the front line. War stories also involve war victims—the refugees who abandon their homes, huddle in camps and pray for peace.

POYNTER NEWSU E-LEARNING COURSE

Learn more about finding focus in *Aim for the Heart* at [www.newsu.org/heart](http://www.newsu.org/heart).

A college professor of mine loved to show us old black-and-white war documentaries. I figured they would be boring and slow. I settled in to endure one of the films and learned the principle that changed how I thought of “story focus” forever. It was an old Edward R. Murrow documentary from CBS News about the Korean War. CBS’ *See It Now* program moved 15 reporters and cameramen to Korea for one week to attempt to capture the face of war. Here is how the program opened:

**“Christmas in Korea”<sup>11</sup>**

**Edward R. Murrow (sound of a shovel digging into frozen earth in the background): This is Korea, where a war is going on. That’s a Marine, digging a hole in the ground. They dig an awful lot of holes in the ground in Korea. This is the front. Just there, no-man’s-land begins and, on the ridges over there, the enemy positions can be clearly seen. In the course of the next hour we shall try to show you around Korea a bit.”**

It was a stunning moment for me as a young television journalist.

Murrow’s cameraman steadily photographed one Marine, chunking his shovel again and again against a frozen ground.

The documentary didn't include one general, not one government official. It told the complex story of the war by putting a face on the story. Murrow and producer Fred Friendly focused the story to the little person closest to it. They would repeat this technique over and over on *See It Now*. Almost 70 years later, it remains the central style of the most popular news magazine programs such as CBS' *60 Minutes*, ABC's *20/20* and *Nightline*, NBC's *Dateline* and NPR's *All Things Considered*.

Murrow and Friendly focused on the ordinary act of shoveling and the ordinary emotion of loneliness, which viewers at home understood.

My three-word summary of "Christmas in Korea" is "Soldiers endure war." The story was not about communism, it was not about foreign policy and it was not about the generals and politicians who got us into that war. Viewers learn a lot about the war's background, but "Christmas in Korea" had a laser-beam focus on the effect the war had on the soldiers and nurses who were closest to the pain, death and loneliness.

**Murrow Interviews Airman Moriarty: I'm Airman Third Class  
Brendon M. Moriarty. I was born and raised in County Kerry,  
Ireland. I been used to mountains all my life, but it's the moun-  
tains (of) Killarney, not the mountains of Korea. I want to wish  
you all a Merry Christmas. Nora, I will be home in two hundred  
and ninety-two days, then we will celebrate Christmas, New  
Year's and St. Patrick's Day—we'll celebrate everything together.  
Okay darling, good-bye.**

The last line chokes me up.

I remember that sound bite from Airman Moriarty 40 years after I first saw it while sitting in a darkened college classroom. The viewer realizes that Airman Moriarty knows, to the day, how long it will be until he is back in Nora's arms. By the time the program ends, viewers will not remember the number of days (292) he has until he goes home. But they will always remember that he knows exactly how long it will be.

It is not enough for viewers to get information about the war. That's *fact* telling, not *story* telling. To make the story memorable, viewers have to feel something. My wife, who is a psychotherapist, tells me that people always remember what they feel longer than what they know.

## A CENTRAL THEME: VIEWERS REMEMBER WHAT THEY FEEL

More than 15 years after I watched that Murrow documentary, I put the lessons I learned to use. Christmas Eve, 1993, I found myself covering a story about soldiers and war. I was assigned to cover the predawn return to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, of soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division who were back from their tour of duty as “peacekeepers” in Somalia. It had been a particularly difficult and deadly mission. Americans entered Somalia with the good intention of feeding starving people, but soldiers were drawn into gunfights with local warlords. Somalis dragged soldiers’ bodies through the streets. You may remember that from the book and movie *Black Hawk Down*. Now, most of the 101st were coming home.

I knew that, in all likelihood, there would be 12 or more television cameras at the event. I guessed that most of us were walking into the story with the same focus: Soldiers come home.

How could we do something different, something more memorable?

Driving to that story at 4 a.m. on that cold Christmas Eve, photojournalist Randy Palmer and I made a quick list of what we thought we might photograph and include in this story.

The list included:

- Families waiting
- People giving soldiers gifts
- A military band
- Tears and people crying
- The airplane
- Soldiers getting off the plane
- Officials making speeches
- Flags
- File and other historic pictures from Somalia
- People cheering

We knew that every other crew covering the story had a similar checklist in mind. We asked ourselves if there were other possibilities.

We considered:

- Someone who is coming home but has no one waiting for him or her
- Going beyond the typical picture of a soldier coming home to find the husband of a female soldier who has been waiting for her return
- Whether families of soldiers who died in Somalia would be there
- Whether families of the soldiers still in Somalia would be there

The Army gave us no access to the waiting families until moments before the plane landed. All of the TV crews scrambled to get shots of the taxiing charter transport plane. Palmer also shot wide shots of the crowded tarmac and panned the cheering assembled crowd. All the while, I was walking through the crowd, looking for an interesting character. We stuck by the side of a woman and her young son who were standing there shivering in the cold, holding flowers for their soldier. I wrote:

### **“Soldier Comes Home”**

**Al Tompkins and Randy Palmer<sup>12</sup>**

**Tompkins: Marla Denson has been here before on the airport tarmac . . . waiting. To be an Army wife, you have to get good at waiting.**

**Marla: Come on, you ready to go see Daddy?**

**(Close-up of shivering son)**

**Tompkins: Her husband, Charles, left for Somalia in August. When he left, the Army’s mission in August was to feed a million starving Africans. (file tape) But the mission changed into an ugly shooting war. Marla knows that other families have waited in her same spot. Their husbands will never come home.**

**Marla: It’s their jobs, they have to do it, they have to do it.**

**Tompkins: How do you get good at waiting?**

**Marla: Prayer, God, family and friends; them’s the four things. If you don’t have them, you can’t make it.**

Tompkins: Judy Gross has gotten good at waiting. She has spent twenty years waiting for her husband, the colonel, to come home from this place or that. This is an unexpected blessing, because nobody knew they were coming home until two days ago. (nat sd [natural sound] of cheering—people coming off the plane)

Judy Gross: Christmas when he was in Saudi, we just kept him in our thoughts and our prayers and we drank a toast to him on Christmas Eve, and that is about all you can do. You just have to think positive thoughts when they are not around.

Tompkins To Marla: What did you say when you heard he was coming in?

Marla: I love you. (laughs) I have to love him. He did his job and now it is over.

Tompkins: One by one, the reunions happened around her. (pictures of a mother screaming, then hugging her daughter) Parents screamed at the sight of their children. Husbands held closely to their wives in uniform. (picture of hands) But she waited. (picture of Marla straining to see the plane) She began to think, maybe he wasn't on this plane. (pause) Maybe there was a problem.

Marla (still looking past the camera, squinting, watching the last few soldiers come down the stairs from the plane): You have to be the mother and the father while they are gone. You have to do everything together. (in the distance—a man shouts, Hey—Hey!)

Marla: That's you! That's you! I love you, Charles! I love you, I love you, I love you, I LOVE you, Charles, I love you, I love you, I love you.

(She kisses him repeatedly as Charles struggles to hold his hand out to his young shivering son who has waited silently.)

Charles (to his son as he picks him up): Hey—Hey man, come here!

Tompkins: Corporal Charles Denson was home, home to be with his wife and his son. She brought him a rose, because,

she said, he was always bringing her roses. She worried her hair didn't look right; she asked him a thousand times if he was okay. One hundred and fifty other Fort Campbell soldiers are still in Somalia tonight. What they wouldn't give to be where he is. He is home for Christmas.

Al Tompkins, Channel 4 News, Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

Take just a few minutes before you read further to answer a question about the focus of the story you just read. In one sentence, how would you describe what this story is about? How would you describe it in three words: a noun, a verb and an object? In other words, who did what?

You might come up with one of these:

- Soldier comes home
- Home for Christmas
- 101st comes home
- Families get present
- 101st completes mission
- Fort celebrates return
- Soldiers rescue Somalia

All of these could be good stories. They are not the story we produced.

I think our story was about Marla.

I think the main action Marla took was waiting.

She was waiting for Charles.

So the focus of the story was "Marla awaits husband." Or "Family awaits daddy."

The verb here is key. Let's see how and why we wove the theme of waiting through this story.

The first sentence said, "Marla Denson has been here before on the airport tarmac . . . waiting. To be an Army wife, you have to get good at waiting."



The second section of copy included, “Marla knows that other families have waited in her same spot. Their husbands will never come home.” Then I ask Marla the question, “How do you get good at waiting?”

The third section of copy said, “Judy Gross has gotten good at waiting. She has spent twenty years waiting for her husband, the colonel, to come home from this place or that.”

All of that waiting builds tension, so when Charles finally does come home, the viewers get a memorable emotional release.

Why did we choose waiting as a central theme? Palmer and I were looking for the common experience the people standing on that tarmac had with our viewers. We know most viewers are not in the military, most are not Army spouses. But everyone has waited. And remember, this was Christmas Eve, a time of waiting.

Waiting became the one experience that everyone who saw that story and everyone we met at that airport shared.

Now I could have focused the story on the fact that soldiers who have been at war came home. I could have recounted how many days they were gone, how many were on the plane, how happy they seemed to be home and how many people showed up to greet them. I could have reported that an officer was there to welcome them back. Those would all have been facts. I call that the “what happened” of the story. And let’s stipulate that it’s important to say what happened. But that’s not what anybody is going to remember in this story. The viewer will be far more interested in the “so what” of the story than the “what.” So I will load up the anchor lead-in with “what happened” (soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division came home after a bloody tour in Somalia). Then I will guide viewers through the “so what” of the story, the story that you cannot readily see or understand without my help. I believe this concept is key to how we will make our TV reporting relevant in a world where the “what” of the story arrives on my mobile phone nonstop. By the time I experience a newscast, there is a fair chance I know “what” the news is. But I still need a journalist to explain what it all means, why it is important, why it happened and what will happen next.

## ■ ■ ■ REMEMBER

Focus your story to one sentence or even three words. Ask yourself, “Who did what?” Answer that question with a noun, a verb and an object. A tight focus will connect with the viewer’s head and heart, and viewers remember what they feel longer than what they know. In breaking news, “what happened” is the most important information. But once the story spreads and the public knows “what” happened, journalists have to focus their energy on the “so what” of the story along with the “what’s next” and “why this happened.”

### USE SOUND BITES THAT CONNECT TO THE VIEWER’S HEART

Great stories turn on great sound bites. Let’s use the “Soldier Comes Home” story to study what makes a sound bite work well.

Here are the sound bites we used:

**Marla:** It’s their jobs, they have to do it, they have to do it.

**Marla:** Prayer, God, family and friends; them’s the four things. If you don’t have them, you can’t make it.

**Judy Gross:** Christmas when he was in Saudi, we just kept him in our thoughts and our prayers and we drank a toast to him on Christmas Eve, and that is about all you can do. You just have to think positive thoughts when they are not around.

**Tompkins to Marla:** What did you say when you heard he was coming in?

**Marla:** I love you. (laughs) I have to love him. He did his job and now it is over.

**Marla (still looking past the camera, squinting, watching the last few soldiers come down the stairs from the plane):** You have to be the mother and the father while they are gone. You have to do everything together. (in the distance—a man shouts, Hey—Hey!)

**Marla:** That’s you! That’s you! I love you, Charles! I love you, I love you, I love you, I LOVE you, Charles, I love you, I love you, I love you.

Look carefully at those sound bites. What do you notice? None of the bites contain facts. They are opinions, emotions and observations from the people who are closest to the story. Nobody else could have said what those people said with the same authenticity. Be careful, though: Don't fall in love with a sound bite. If it does not relate to the main meaning of the story, drop it. Focus matters more than a sound bite.



Now let's look at the copy—the words I spoke as the reporter.

**Tompkins:** Marla Denson has been here before on the airport tarmac . . . waiting. To be an Army wife, you have to get good at waiting.

**Tompkins:** Her husband, Charles, left for Somalia in August. When he left, the Army's mission in August was to feed a million starving Africans. (file tape) But the mission changed into an ugly shooting war. Marla knows that other families have waited in her same spot. Their husbands will never come home.

**Tompkins:** Judy Gross has gotten good at waiting. She has spent twenty years waiting for her husband, the colonel, to come home from this place or that. This is an unexpected blessing, because nobody knew they were coming home until two days ago.

**Tompkins:** One by one, the reunions happened around her. (pictures of a mother screaming, then hugging her daughter) Parents screamed at the sight of their children. Husbands held closely to their wives in uniform. (picture of hands) But she waited. (picture of Marla straining to see the plane) She began to think, maybe he wasn't on this plane. (pause) Maybe there was a problem.

**Tompkins:** Corporal Charles Denson was home, home to be with his wife and his son. She brought him a rose, because, she said, he was always bringing her roses. She worried her hair didn't look right, she asked him a thousand times if he was okay. One hundred and fifty other Fort Campbell soldiers are still in Somalia tonight. What they wouldn't give to be where he is. He is home for Christmas.

**Al Tompkins,** Channel 4 News, Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

What do you notice about the copy? In this story, the copy includes all the facts and details that explain what viewers are seeing on the screen but would not understand if I didn't explain it.

I didn't say in the copy, "She hugged and kissed him. She was so happy to see him." Viewers could see that. I wanted viewers to know what Marla said she worried about (her hair); I wanted them to know why she brought him a rose (because he was always bringing her roses).

Once you learn and teach others this guideline of subjective sound (opinions and emotions) and objective copy (the facts and details), you won't have to settle for those awful and predictable interviews that producers too often see from police or public information officers. Anyone who has conducted an interview with a stiff-talking police officer knows what the typical interview includes:

**Reporter: What do we have here, Officer?**

**Officer: We have a white male, shot twice with a large caliber weapon. The deceased died on the scene. An investigation is under way.**

The only story focus that would come out of that line of questioning would be: "Shooting kills man." It is not a new or even interesting story.

Every producer groans when he or she hears that interview. Some news directors, in an act of frustration, have even banned interviewing officials in an attempt to get rid of the objective sound bite.

Questions that include the word "what" usually produce responses that are factual. "What time is it?" "What happened here?" They are important questions, but the answers usually produce better copy than sound bites.

Producers and photojournalists must coach their reporter colleagues to ask subjective questions.

How about this:

**Reporter: Officer Jones, you were the first person on the scene. What went through your mind when you saw this body in the middle of the street?**

**Officer Jones:** I said to myself, not again. This is the third murder this month.

**Reporter:** You have been working this side of town a long time. How safe is our town?

**Officer Jones:** I think the city is safe, but this area right here, these ten city blocks are a real problem. We've got to get a handle on this. This is crazy.

This interview might give us the basis for a much more interesting focus: "Murder troubles officer."

The subjective sound bite guideline also makes it easier to pick bites from speeches and long ceremonies. Be alert for the opinion, feeling or emotion. That is the bite that creates the lump in the viewer's throat.

I sometimes ask participants in my seminars and workshops whether any of them struggled with math. Invariably, hands shoot up (an interesting common trait of journalists; many of us are bad at math). I ask the participants if they remember being asked, in the fourth grade, to go to the board and work out a math problem in front of the class. Of course they do. I ask why they remember that, and the answers are touching. High-powered professional journalists confess in front of a crowd that they were embarrassed by how they felt when they got the answer wrong in front of their class. But then I ask a key question, "What was that problem you were trying to work out?" Of course, nobody remembers. The illustration is complete; they remember what they feel far longer than what they know.

I believe this ability to teach through feelings is the key strength of video, especially television. Other media have other strengths. There is something about the tactile nature of newspapers or even smartphones that allows me to learn by cognitively interacting with the information. I can read it again and again to understand the story and information more deeply. The internet allows me to learn by interacting with information on the screen. Radio allows me to learn by imagining. But television is unique in its ability to teach through emotions and sensory experiences.

## REMEMBER

As you aim for the viewer's heart, use sound bites for the subjective part of your story (the thoughts, opinions, feelings and emotions); use copy for the objective part of your story (the facts and the details).

## NOTES

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