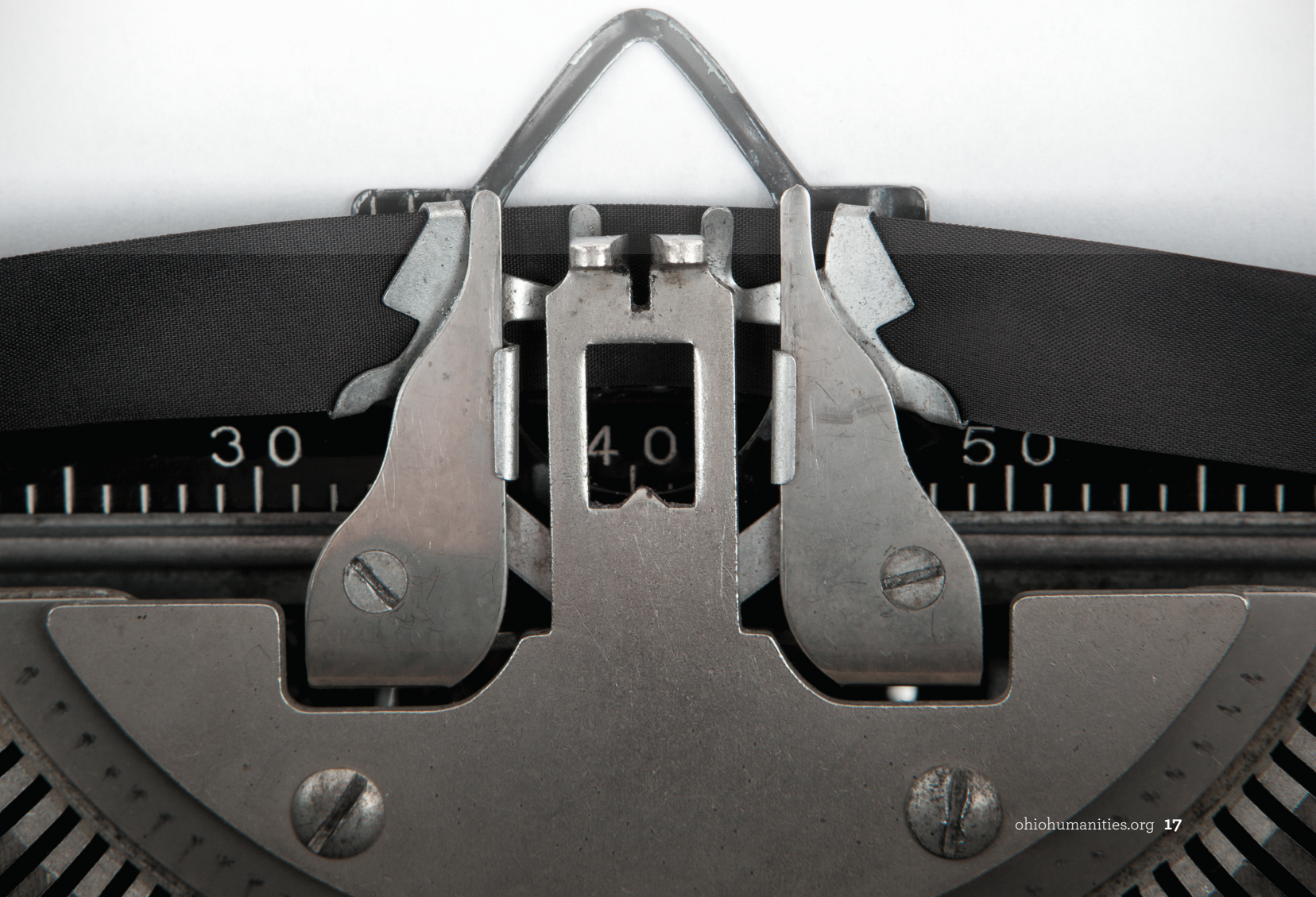


ELEMENTS OF STYLE: WRITING THE NEWS

Tom Borgerding shares tips for identifying what's newsworthy from
30-plus years in the trade. | By Leticia Wiggins. Illustrations by Misty Porter.





Tom
Borgerding

TOM BORGERDING REMEMBERS THE DAY HIS FATHER GAVE HIM A TRANSISTOR RADIO. He was ten years old and remembers listening constantly to baseball games and news from WIL in St. Louis. It was magic, the way such a small box emitted so many familiar and foreign sounds. Reports on WIL brought the news to life with audio of sirens and ambulances, bringing Borgerding “right in the middle of downtown St. Louis with mayhem going on.” This aural storytelling intrigued Borgerding; he wanted to see how radio was being produced. This small gift from his father began a self-proclaimed “love affair with radio.”

Borgerding learned the ins and outs of radio at The Ohio State University, where he studied mass communications. After graduation, he landed a job at WPFB in Middletown to report the news. Eventually, he was hired by WOSU-Public Media as an assignment reporter where he covered the news for 30 years.

Podcast producer Leticia Wiggins sought his expertise about how news stories are constructed.

LETICIA WIGGINS: How do you know what will make a good news story?

TOM BORGERDING: Certain elements make a good news story: conflict, consequence, proximity, timeliness, and significance.



LW: Break it down for me. What do each of those elements contribute to a news story?

TB: For a good story, you have to have a well-defined conflict. If you’re talking about Sunday picnics, that’s not going to make the news, because there’s not a lot of conflict. For example, the California wildfires are a conflict between man and nature. There’s always conflict in political contests, so they are heavily covered. If a journalist is doing his or her job it informs the consumer because the conflict is being covered thoroughly.



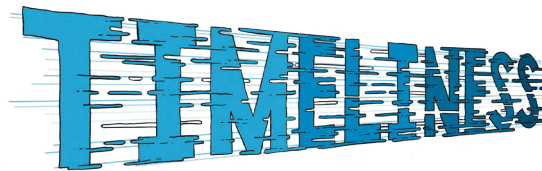
LW: What do you mean when you say a story needs to have consequence?

TB: Consequence determines the importance of a story. For instance, when the consequence is the future of the Republic . . . that’s a big issue

politically for the entire country. So the coverage of congressional races is important. Regardless of the outcome, the story has to be covered because of its consequence and conflict.



Proximity is especially important for local news reporting. Reporters need to actually be at the scene of a story. Whether it’s a court case, a hurricane, or a board meeting, it is important for reporters to have their eyes and ears somewhere on the ground. To attend a protest and see anti-protesters clash in person is far different than watching on a drone—you know how the tear gas smells, you can judge if the crowd is agitated, you can feel that and report firsthand.



LW: Being at the scene of the story means reporting within a certain timeframe, right? Being in on the action while it is happening.

TB: There are at least fifty good stories every day that don’t get reported. We had a crew of six at WOSU and we met every day. We were saddled by timeliness, and, of course, doing NPR-style reports takes a little more time to put together. The difference between journalism and history is timeliness. You have to be timely in reporting a story, but you don’t have to be so timely that you get off the main point or you get a fact wrong.

For news consumers, it’s gotten to the point with the internet that timeliness can be a drag to



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understanding. If you're following a story every ten minutes on your phone, that's a lot of information to process—whether you're a scholar or a truck driver or a radio journalist. One of the benefits of being retired is I can step back and say “you know what, I'm going to let the editors and reporters do their job and tune into the news tonight at five o'clock. Or read the paper tomorrow for a curated, edited story that hopefully has been verified and double sourced.

SIGNIFICANCE

LW: Now, I have to bug you for that fifth and final step.

TB: Of course, the last element is significance. Some stories are more significant than others. For Ohio I think the steel tariffs are more significant than whether Elon Musk takes Tesla private. . . . This is a significant story for Ohio and they'll report that story more thoroughly than reporters would in Utah or Colorado.

Those are the five elements I look for in news reporting.

LW: Why is fake news such an issue? How can individuals navigate the fake news environment?

TB: People don't always remember that journalism is based on facts. What happens is that if people disagree with the facts, they'll dismiss the story even though the story is truthful and was recorded honestly. If people choose to not believe, that's on them, not on the journalists. Facts and truth are not debatable. If there's an argument about the truth of a story, it's really an argument about how individuals internalize the truth.

Nowadays, consumers have to vet the news a lot more closely and that takes a lot of time. I know people are pressed for time, but it really is the consumer who has to weed through all the chaff and just get to the wheat, so to speak. Listen to a newscaster or two on the radio, read a newspaper—preferably two newspapers, including a national and local newspaper.

LW: Finally, what makes a good journalist?

TB: Morbid curiosity. How's that? You have to get up every day and be willing to learn something. And you have to talk to people. You have to go out and find the people who are affected. ♥

Leticia Wiggins, PhD, is a multimedia producer for WOSU Public Media.