

# Writing a News Report: The Strength and Limitations of Online “How-To Guides”

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## ABSTRACT

People who wish to work in news reporting may often refer to online guides on news writing before entering the industry. Such guides, some published by professional news institutions and journalism schools, others by nonprofit educational websites, usually offer a set structure and a series of writing conventions of new writing. This article documents a research that examines the strength and limitations of the suggestions offered by online guides on writing news reports. A convention checklist was created that combined seven most popular conventions from ten guides. A comparative analysis of the seven conventions from the check list and those that appear on three reputable newspapers on the same news topic published on the same day was then conducted to determine the effectiveness of the guides. A survey was also sent to 20 news reporters at The Daily Californian, in which they pick the elements they will include in their news report from the seven conventions. Evidence was found that six out of seven writing conventions online “how-to guides” offer match those that appear on newspapers and all seven conventions are identified by the news reporters from The Daily Californian as elements they would incorporate in their writing. However, 100% reporters strongly agreed it is the experience gained from working as a reporter that helped them improve their skills on news writing, not the guides. An interview with one of the reporters further confirmed the limitations of online “how-to guides” for they only cover the mechanics of writing a news report. A successful news report not only demands a concise structure and effective language but also the reporter’s ability to gather information, conduct effective interviews, and connect with sources. Such skills can only be strengthened through hands on practice.

*Keywords:* news report, conventions, online “how-to guide,” practitioner, journalistic writing

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background

From cooking a meal to writing an application essay, people tend to rely on guides due to the lack of prior experience, and following the “how-to guides” provides them reassurance and guidance. The situation also applies to people who wish to work as news reporters. Without much familiarity of writing in the field of journalism, and in particular, news, “how-to guides” become an easily accessible resource for them to refer to. Google generates millions of guides for the search question “How to write a news report?” The majority of guides come from two sources: professional news organizations and educational websites. Unlike formal guide books, these online “how-to guides” are concise and provide steps to follow in a numbered list. Most of the online guides on news writing suggest writers to follow a set structure from the introduction to the end. They also offer writing conventions of news reports.

## 1.2 Statement of problem

Guides are helpful, but to what extent? There are limited information on the effectiveness of online guides on writing a news report. People can look at the reviews of a guide book and decide whether it is effective or not, but there are no evaluations for online news writing guide. Is following these guides enough for writing a news report? If not, what are some other ways to prepare for news writing? This is where my research steps in. This article documents my research that aims to explore the extent to which the online guides on writing news reports echo or deviate from the standard and expectations of the field of journalism.

## 1.3 Questions and Objectives

To determine the strength and limits of online guides on writing news reports, the more specific questions to be asked are:

- 1) What are conventions of news writing according to online “how-to guides”?
- 2) Are these conventions covered by reputable newspapers?
- 3) Do these conventions echo what trained journalists do when they write news reports?
- 4) Are there aspects of news writing that online “how-to guides” fail to cover?

## 2. Methodology

To explore the common conventions online “how-to guides” suggest, ten “how-to guides” on news writing from news organizations and educational websites were selected. I analyzed each one and created a checklist (see Appendix 1) of the seven most popular conventions these “how-to guides” cover.

To examine the applicability of these conventions, a news topic that is covered by three reputable newspapers, The New York Times, Washington Post, and USA today was then chosen. The topic I chose was Ann Coulter’s canceled speech at UC Berkeley in 2017. The reason I chose this topic was because it was likely to be reported by different newspapers around a similar time frame, making precise comparison possible. I found three news articles from the three newspapers mentioned above that report Ann Coulter’s canceled speech at the University of California, Berkeley on the same date (April, 26, 2017). By matching the elements in the convention checklist with those in newspapers, the effectiveness of online “how-to” guides can be determined. A check mark was assigned if the convention from the checklist appear in the newspaper article. (For inexplicit conventions such as active tense and simple sentences, a check mark was assigned if 80% of the certain convention in the article match the convention checklist).

To further determine the effectiveness of the conventions, a survey (see Appendix

2) of 20 news staff at The Daily Californian was conducted. This survey enabled me to evaluate the quality of online guides based on answers from reporters directly. The questions went from broad to specific. The first section of the survey gathered background information about the respondents regarding their prior experience in writing news reports, the time they have been working at The Daily Californian, and the reasons for joining the newspaper. The following section explored reporters' tendencies of referring to online "how-to guides" when writing a news report and their perspectives on such guides. I asked the respondents to choose from a range of 1 (never) to 5 (always) instead of merely "yes and no" for specificity. The next section asked the news staff to identify whether they will use the seven conventions from the checklist mentioned above while writing a news report. Reporters may choose more than one conventions for this question. I didn't mention that these seven conventions are from online guides in order to reduce preconceived bias. Respondents are also asked to provide other resources that help them with their writing in the last section of the survey. Finally, I asked them to provide contact information if they would like to be contacted for follow-up questions. A request was sent via email to the staff representative of The Daily Californian who agreed to include the survey in her newsletter to the twenty news reporters.

### **3. Findings**

#### *Conventions in Reputable Newspapers*

I will first present the seven conventions I gathered from the ten online guides. The first convention, to follow the "inverted pyramid" structure focuses on the structure of the news article. The "inverted pyramid" structure places the most important fact at the very beginning and works down from there. Having the overview at the beginning enables readers to decide whether the information is interesting and useful for further reading. If they find the topic of interest, they would continue to read the rest of the article which expands on the topic provided at the beginning.

The other six convention focus on things to pay attention to when actually writing the news article. The second convention is to include a lead sentence at the beginning to grab reader's attention and provide the most important information regarding the topic of the news article. The third convention is to have a concise introduction that does not give everything away. An ideal introduction should contain less than twenty-five words and encourages readers to read on in order to know what happened regarding the topic. The fourth convention is to use active tense that is more immediate (gives reader a sense this is happening now). The fifth convention is to use short, precise quotes instead of long ones given that news articles are expected to deliver content in a brief manner.

Further, direct quotes are preferred to paraphrases because they add characteristic to the person being interviewed. The sixth convention is to employ common words and simple sentences (no more than 15 words) instead of flowery ones considering the article is written for a public audience and its major purpose is to inform. The final convention is to use “Who, What, When, Where, Why” to check if the article has covered as many aspects as possible. My comparison is as follows:

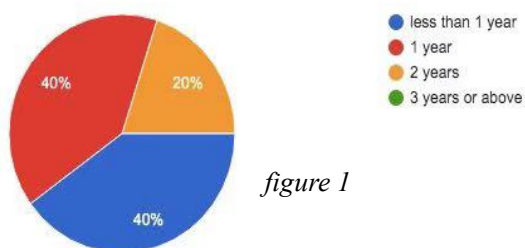
*Data Table: Conventions for Journalistic Writing*

	The New York Times	Washington Post	USA Today
Inverted Pyramid	√	√	√
Lead Sentence	X	X	X
Concise introduction	√	√	√
Active Tense	√	√	√
Short (direct) quote	9 out of 12 quotes are direct	19 out of 23 quotes are direct	5 out of 7 quotes are direct
Common words and simple sentences( no more than 15 words)	√	√	√
Coverage of 5Ws	√	√	√

*Conventions in Action: Surveys*

Five news reporters from The Daily Californian responded to my survey. In the first section, when asked about the reasons of joining The Daily Californian, three reporters chose “interested in writing” while the other two chose “I want to work in the industry of journalism after graduation,” and “I hope to attend a journalism school.”

How long have you been working at The Daily Californian



*figure 1*

The five reporters all worked no more than two years at The Daily Californian (figure 1) and had prior experience of writing news report. The earliest dated back to middle school (figure 2).

For the following section, when asked about if they refer to online “how-to guides” when writing a news report, 60% of the reporters said they would never use a “how-to guide” and the other 40% seldom refer to online “how-to guides.” Further, 100% of respondents agreed the experience gained when working as a journalist improved their journalistic writing.

Regarding the next section of the survey that asked respondents to point out conventions they use from the checklist, every one of the convention had more than 50%

When did you write your first news report?

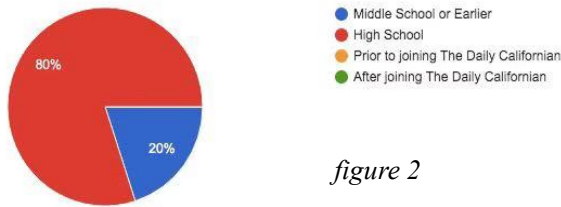


figure 2

identification. All the reporters checked “pay attention to style, quotes, and active tense,” and “use common words and short sentences.” The other five conventions all have 80% identification (figure 3).

For the final section that asked respondents to describe resources that they use to improve their writing, only one respondent

When doing journalistic writing, I tend to (check all that apply)

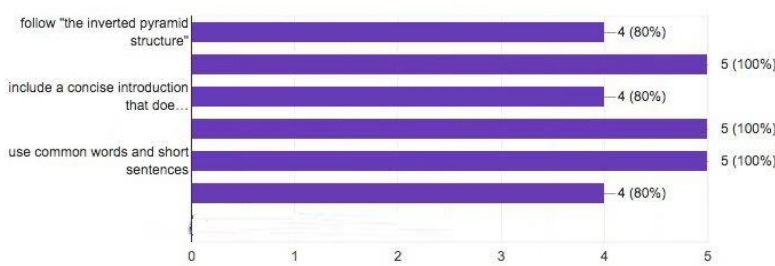


figure 3

mentioned referring to *Associated Press Stylebook*, a grammar and usage guide for journalists. This pattern is similar to reporters’ low ratings of the online “how-to” guides. The other responses include reading other reporters’ works from reputable newspapers such as New York Times and

The Atlantic, improving writing through peer-editing with other editors, and learning from a high school English teacher who used to be a journalist.

One of the respondent, Kate Finman, the Lead Student Government Reporter left her email address for follow up questions and I contacted her via email with a few questions based on her responses in the survey. Since Kate identifies five conventions suggested by online guides, I asked whether she thinks there is a set structure that can be followed when writing a news report, and her answer was definite. As Kate chose “strongly agree” for the question “the experience gained from working as a journalist, instead of online “how-to guides” improved my writing,” I asked her to elaborate on

how such experience helped her. One of the critical thing Kate said was “The real way to be a journalist is through practice.” Books such as AP Style help, however: “you can’t sit down and memorize AP Style, but as you continue to write and edit your articles with others, you learn the little grammar rules and the proper ways to phrase things.” Similarly, Kate emphasized it is unrealistic to just sit down and master how to interview people: “over time you learn which questions are best to ask and how to deal with difficult experience and so much more, all through making mistakes and learning from experiences.”

#### **4. Discussion**

##### **4.1 *Conventions in Newspapers Discussion***

Regarding the conventions of writing news articles, the majority offered by the online guides focus on structure and wording. There are very minute disparities between the suggestions of the “how-to guides” and what appear in the three reputable newspapers that covered the same topic. The writing conventions of the three news articles overlap with almost the entire convention checklist. All of them present the important fact at the beginning and expand in later paragraphs. They all include a short and precise introduction, direct quotes that take up over seventy percent of the quotes employed, as much active tense as possible, simple sentences, and complete coverage of “Who, What, When, Where, Why.” Interestingly, none of the three news article includes a separate lead sentence that serves to grab attention. It is possible to assume that as reputable newspapers, the need to draw readers through eye-catching lead sentences is unnecessary given the stable group of subscribers. Therefore, the sentences at the beginning are only responsible for summarizing the most important information, in this case, Ann Coulter’s canceled speech, instead of attracting readers to read on. However, since the online “how-to” guides are mostly written for beginning journalists, it is reasonable to suggest them to include a sentence to grab attention at the beginning of their news article. Overall, despite the lead sentences, the conventions suggested by online “how-to” guides are covered in all three news articles. As a result, following the online guides guarantees a similar structure, if not quality, of the professional news report.

##### **4.2 *Conventions in Action: Surveys Discussion***

All the respondents of the survey had prior experience of writing a news report before joining the Daily Cal, and this may be a major reason for their low ratings on how often they refer to online “how-to guides”. These guides are stereotypically considered a tool for those without much experience in news report writing. Despite their low tendency to refer to online “how-to” guides, 100% of the respondents identified at least five out

of the seven conventions offered by online “how-to Guides.” In other words, even though they did not recognize the effectiveness of online “how-to guides,” the elements they included in their news report were actually a perfect match with what the guides suggest. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the writing conventions suggested by online “how-to guides” echo what trained reporters include in their news reports.

Some of the news reporters at DailyCal have access to resources such as peer editing and professional support and often started as a journalist quite early so they may not need to refer to “how-to guides” because they are already familiar with the protocols in the field. However, not everyone is able to find such help when writing a news report. This is where online “how-to guides” become helpful. Since some of the news reporters also mention how reading works from reputable newspapers are helpful tools to improve their writing, and that the structures and conventions appeared in newspapers match the ones in “how-to guides,” these guides are effective in helping prospective news reporters structure their news report. As Kate mentioned, news report, unlike other journalistic writings, has a fixed pattern that can be followed. Online “how-to guides” capture this pattern precisely and thus are able to guide people toward the expected standard of news report in the field of journalism.

However, online guides are helpful only to a certain extent. Just as all respondents of the survey agreed upon, the more important way of writing a successful news report is to master soft skills of news writing through practice. The low tendency of referring to online guides among the reporters also suggests that once people join in the industry, there are far more to learn than that suggested by “how to guides.” Once reporters gather all the information, these guides can help them make sure that they follow the standard structure of news reports. The process of gathering data, asking the right interview question, and connecting different sources cannot be learned from an online “how-to guide.” Just like Kate said, there is no written guide that teaches news reporters things to ask when interviewing different people, what to do when difficulties arise when connecting sources, and how to select the most useful information from pages of notes. It is only through hands on experience that reporters learn these skills.

### 4.3 *Limitations*

My methodology in comparing the conventions from the ten online “how-to guides” to those that appear in reputable newspapers is limited in the way that I only chose seven most common conventions. There could be other conventions mentioned by other online “how-to guides” that do not appear in the newspapers. Also, ten is a relative small number considering the large amount of “how-to guides” available online. In terms of the survey, the sample size is also small. Further, the five respondents all worked for a similar amount of time at *The Daily Californian*, and

their perspective may not be representative of other news reporters who worked longer. Even though The Daily Californian is a well recognized news institution, it is a student-run newspaper. The opinions from student reporters may not represent those of the more professional ones. Despite the limitations, I believe the conclusions I drew are reasonable based on the data I gathered, and the data satisfies the expectations of an introductory research. Further steps can be taken based on my findings, which I will later discuss in the future studies section.

## **5. Conclusion**

Online “how-to guides” on news report have both strength and weakness. The writing conventions they proposed match what appear on reputable newspapers and what trained news reporters at The Daily Californian include in their news reports. However, online guides do not cover the soft skills required when writing a news report such as interviewing, finding and connecting with sources, selecting information from notes, and solving unexpected problems. For prospective journalists, in order to write a successful news report, referring to “how-to guides” is not enough. Like Kate said, “they have to go out in the world and actively report and ask questions and write and learn in order to write a great news report.”

### *Future Studies*

There are multiple genres of journalistic writing besides news report such as columns, feature articles, and editorials. My research only covers one aspect of the large field of journalistic writing and evaluates the online “how-to guides” on news reports. There may be online “how-to guides” on different genres of journalistic writing and their effectiveness depend on the elements that certain type of writing values. Future researches can follow a similar format, first comparing the conventions suggested by online “how-to guides” with professional articles of that genre, then surveying practitioners in the field to gain a more comprehensive sense of the effectiveness of those guides. If researchers are also interested in news reports, then they can consider expanding the size of online “how to guides” and articles of newspapers, as well as the reporters they survey in order to find more representative results. It is also possible for following up studies to explore the effectiveness of other forms of “how to guide” such as guide books, following similar pattern of my research.



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## Research Reflection

The discussion we had in class was the major inspiration for my research: where do you envision yourself in 3-4 years, and what knowledge or resources would you hope you have learned? I see myself as a journalist in the future. In 3-4 years, I may be applying to journalism school or directly diving into the industry of news reporting, both of which would require turning in a journalistic writing sample. Since UC Berkeley only offers a summer Journalism minor and no other journalism-related courses for undergraduate students, I really hoped to find resources that would help me to prepare for news writing. The first thing that came to mind was to google “How to write a news report,” and looking at the numerous results, I had the idea of examining the strength and limits of online “how- to guides” on news writing, hoping the results I found were able to help prospective journalists like me when evaluating what sources to refer to when writing, probably their first, news report.

At the start of my research, the most exciting thing was to be able to get in touch with news reporters at The Daily Californian, an organization I hope to join in the future, and have them answer the survey that points to my research question: are online “how-to guides” effective? Meanwhile, I was also worried that they may not reply to my survey. Initially, I sent an email explaining the goal of my research to the news department at DailyCal, but got no replies. I then decided to start with individuals. I went on to Facebook and sent messages to people who are in the DailyCal group if they would like to participate in the survey. Similar requests were also sent to people who identified themselves as news reporters at DailyCal on their Twitter bios. Some of the reporters leave their contact information on DailyCal’s website, and I contacted them as well. I almost felt like a reporter exploring different possibilities of connecting sources throughout this process. When I was ready to initiate the backup plan, to print out surveys and bring them to the DailyCal’s office myself, one of the reporters I contacted via Facebook said he was familiar with the staff representative of news reporters and gave me her contact information. This friendly representative then agreed to include my survey in the newsletter to the staff members of the news department.

Further, my views about research deepened during my work. When reading research articles on academic journals, I used to take the data and results scholars gathered for granted and focused on their results and conclusions. After conducting a research by myself, I realized that besides the results, the process mattered as well as I came to understand how every step comes together to contribute to the final results. The conclusion is not determined by a single piece of evidence but rather the complex process of designing methodology, analyzing the data and so much more. Having this in mind, at the Research Festival, when I listened to a presenter explain Obama’s motivation drive from a cultural and literary analysis point of view, I asked follow up questions based on his research process and why he design the methods in a certain way. He was glad that I was not just interested in what conclusions he found, but how he reached those conclusions.

Regarding my own research process, discovering unexpected evidence is quite exciting. Initially, I believed my research would lead to the conclusion that online “how-to guides” are unreliable, and I was surprised to find that the writing conventions suggested by “how-to guides” actually matched what appear on reputable newspapers and what news reporters include in their writing. The brief interview I had with one of the reporters enabled me to think about the limits of the “how-to guides” not regarding their inaccuracy I initially assumed but regarding what aspects of news reporting that cannot be taught and must be learned through practice.

In addition to developing a more in-depth understanding about the research process and discovering surprising information, I also gained pride and satisfaction of learning how to write a news report after reading ten “how-to guides” and making the convention list. Unlike at the beginning of my research when I knew almost nothing about news writing, I am now confident to write a standard news report that follows the expectations of the field of journalism. It could also possibly be submitted as my sample in my application to DailyCal next semester. Talking to the reporter through email also enabled me to learn that in order to be a professional news reporter, learning to write a news report is far not enough because soft skills such as connecting sources and sorting information are also necessary. I now know what aspects I need to work on in the future in order to become a better news reporter: to keep practicing and learning from mistake through hands on experience. In the end, I found the motivations of doing this research project as not only endeavoring to get a good grade in this course, but also digging into the field I wish to join in the future and gaining useful information that would help me move towards the right direction.

As my research allowed me to find the strength and limits on “how-to” guides on writing a news report, I hope to expand the scope of my research in the future and investigate the effectiveness of guides and even courses on other forms of journalistic writing. In this way, I wish to help my peers who also want to work in journalism find appropriate resources that lead them closer to their dreams.