

Writing a News Story

Assignment:

Your assignment over the next few class periods will be to write a series of news stories based on information contained here. Using your knowledge and judgment of the elements of news and of how to write an inverted pyramid story, sort through the list of notes about the event to select those that best factually and objectively tell the story.

Goals: Students will...

1. Learn about news leads.
2. Learn about inverted pyramid writing/news writing structure.
3. Solidify their understanding of the elements of news.
4. Practice objectivity (keep personal opinions/comments out of writing).

The Scenario:

For this assignment, pretend you are a reporter for the Kennedy High *Torch*. Your editor calls you on Wednesday night to say she has received word that police broke up a large party that same night that included several dozen Kennedy High School students. You have been assigned to cover the story within the hour for the Kennedy High School Web site, www.torch.org

You immediately get to work, first by contacting the Carmel Police Department and speaking to Officer Jeremy Boots, who was the ranking officer on the scene and the one who made the initial report. His quotes and information are included in this packet. He allows you to see the official police report, the information from which is also included here. In addition, you speak to a few students who were at the party but left before the police came. None of the students cited in the police report agreed to speak with you.

Process:

1. Sort through the facts. Weed out those that are not newsworthy and those that are unattributed statements of opinion.
2. Arrange the facts in the best order. This order should reflect the newsworthiness of the facts; the most newsworthy facts should appear earlier in the story than less important ones. Judge newsworthiness as if you were writing for the *Torch Online*, our student news Web site.
3. As the story progresses from day to day, you may be able to use some (but not all) of the information gathered from previous days. Think, what information is still valid? What information do readers need to know for background even several days later?

Writing a News Story

Day 1: Thursday

Reporter's notes:

According to Officer Jeremy Boots and the official police report:

- Officers responded on Wednesday, Jan. 19 at 9:28 p.m. to a noise complaint at 4971 Northwood Dr. NE, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 52402.
- Once on the scene, officers detained several dozen people after they saw evidence of underage drinking.
- A few students were visibly intoxicated.
- Officers administered Breathalyzer tests to 18 individuals, all of whom were under the legal drinking age. All of those Breathalyzed tested positive for alcohol.
- Four of the underage drinkers were over the age of 18, three of those are students at Kennedy High School. Their names are John Smith, Mary Worthington and Blake Myers.
- Blake Myers is the starting center for the Kennedy High School basketball team. At 6'9" tall, Myers is the tallest member of the Kennedy team and was named second team All-State last season.
- The house belongs to John Smith's parents, Stephen and Cindy Smith, who were not at home during the event.
- This is the second time police have responded to this address for a noise complaint. The first was on May 21, 2010. No report for drinking was filed at that time, though police documented the noise complaint and subsequent warning.
- Quotes:
 1. "This isn't the first time we've responded to noise complaints or incidents involving underage drinking. We hope this serves as a lesson for students that they shouldn't participate in these activities. The police department will respond, and we will punish the offenders."
 2. "Some of the people at the party ran before we could detain them. Those that remained, however, were very cooperative with police."
 3. "We contacted the parents, who were out of town, and they were very shocked to hear the news. They said they were on their way home to deal with their children."

According to students who attended:

- Carrie Johnson, sophomore: "I heard about the party and got there about 8 but left immediately when I saw alcohol there. It looked like everybody was drinking. My folks wouldn't be happy if I stayed. Knowing how it turned out, I'm glad they gave me that advice."
- Mark Morris, senior: "I was there for a while, but drinking's not my scene. I bugged out about 9 before the cops came. I saw a whole lot of drinking there. I saw some people, too, who probably wouldn't want their parents, or their coaches, to know about them being there."
- Another student who did not want to be named said that he had seen a Facebook posting that showed numerous other members of the basketball team at the party with Meyers.

Writing a News Story

Day 2: Monday

New information:

- Blake Myers, the starting center for the basketball team who was cited on Jan. 19 for underage drinking, is still practicing with the Kennedy High School basketball team.
- The team's scheduled game Friday against Debuque Senior was cancelled due to poor weather.
- The team's next game is Tuesday night against 4A top-ranked Linn Mar, its arch-rival and the team that beat Kennedy at the State Final last year.
- At the beginning of each season, Kennedy High School policy requires athletes to sign a Code of Conduct form that ensures students will adhere to certain guidelines, including behavior that follows school rules and local laws. If they do not adhere to the rules, the Code of Conduct outlines a series of punishments that coaches/sponsors will mete out.
- The basketball Code of Conduct states the following: "Any athlete who breaks local, state or federal laws will be immediately dismissed from the team."
- Myers and his parents, Charles and Claudia Myers, have appealed the underage drinking citation. They have a court date scheduled for Jan. 28, three days after the Linn-Mar game.

According to sources:

- Head Coach Byron Ruggenstein has refused to comment.
- Athletics Director Frank Morton: "This is a matter we are investigating closely."
- Blake Myers has refused to comment, as have his parents.
- Linn-Mar Head Coach Stanley Simpson: "I'm not completely clear on the facts of the case, but I do know that if one of my players broke a law, he wouldn't be playing with the team."
- Jackson Walter, starting point guard and senior: "The case is under appeal. As far as I'm concerned, he's innocent until proven guilty. He should get to play until the judge makes his decision next week."

Writing a News Story

Day 3: Tuesday

New information:

- Kennedy High School boys basketball Head Coach Byron Ruggenstein announced that he will not play Blake Myers in tonight's game against rival Linn-Mar High School.
- Ruggenstein made the announcement during a press conference at the high school at 9:30 a.m. on Tuesday morning, along with Athletics Director Frank Morton.
- Blake Myers was not at the press conference.
- Ruggenstein said his decision was merely a suspension for Myers, and not an outright dismissal from the team, citing the scheduled Jan. 28 court date the Myers family has for an appeal of the underage drinking citation. Pending the outcome of that appeal, Ruggenstein said he would make a more definitive decision.
- Blake Myers's parents, Charles and Claudia Myers, followed the press conference by meeting with reporters from local newspaper and TV stations, and they said they felt their son was being unfairly criticized and they planned to sue the school should the suspension stand.

According to sources:

- Head Coach Byron Ruggenstein:
 1. "The case has brought quite a bit of media attention, and I feel it's in the best interest of the rest of the team for me to make this decision. Regardless of the outcome in court, it has not been disputed that Blake was at the party on Wednesday night, and even if he wasn't drinking, simply the decision to attend the party wasn't a good one. I need to treat Blake as I would any other member of my team, regardless of talent level."
 2. "Blake's a great young man, but he made a bad decision (to attend the party). I believe very strongly that we, as high school coaches and teachers, are here to teach students. This is a tough lesson for Blake, but I feel confident that we'll all learn something from this in the coming weeks."
- Athletics Director Frank Morton: "I fully support Coach Ruggenstein in his decision. We have a clearly outlined Code of Conduct form that our athletes to sign, and it's important for our athletes to know that we take that form seriously. We do hold our athletes to a higher standard because of their leadership role both on and off the field. That's why we have students and their parents sign the form in the first place."
- Charles Myers, Blake's father in a prepared statement: "We feel that our son has been unjustly singled out in this incident, and we feel that this subsequent punishment from the school is unwarranted and excessive. Other students were also involved in this incident and they have not received the same scrutiny as Blake."

Sample Story - Day 1

Starting Center among 18 cited for underage drinking

The All-State center of the basketball team was one of three Kennedy students cited for under-aged drinking after police raided a noisy party earlier tonight at a neighborhood home.

Blake Meyers the 6'9" center of the basketball team was one of what police estimated as several dozen young people who attended the party cited at the home of John Smith while his parents were out of town.

Police responded to a noise complaint at the Smith home at 4971 Northwood Drive NE at 9:28 tonight. There they discovered what police officer Jeremy Boots estimated as several dozen people. The administered Brethalyzer tests to 18 individuals who appeared visible intoxicated. All of these were cited for underage drinking. In addition to Myers, the police report named four students who were over the age of 18 including Kennedy students Smith and Mary Worthington.

Smith's parents, Stephen and Cindy Smith, were out of town and police said that they were shocked to hear the news of the party and were on their way home to deal their children.

Meyers earned second team All-State recognition last year and is the starting center for the varsity basketball team and its tallest player.

This is the second time that police had responded to noise complaints at this address. The earlier incident happened last May, but not report for under-aged drinking was issued at that time. Officer Boots said that they regularly respond to noise complaints and incidents of under-aged drinking. "We hope this serves as a lesson to students that they shouldn't participate in these activities. The police department will respond, and we will punish the offenders," he said.

Boots also said that some of the party-goers fled the scene before police could detain them, but that those who were detained cooperated with police.

Social networking sites buzzed with reports of the party. Kennedy sophomore Carrie Johnson said, "I heard about the party and got there about 8 but left immediately when I saw alcohol there. It looked like everyone was drinking. My folks wouldn't be happy if I'd stayed. Knowing how it turned out, I'm glad they gave me this advice."

Sample Story - Day 2

Center still playing despite drinking citation

Despite receiving an underage drinking citation last week, Blake Myers, starting center for KHS and senior, is still practicing with the basketball team, in violation of his signed Code of Conduct form.

Blake's parents, Charles and Claudia Myers, have appealed the underage drinking citation and have a court date scheduled for Jan. 28.

According to the our school Code of Conduct form, "Any athlete who breaks local, state or federal laws will be immediately dismissed from the team." School policy requires all student athletes and their parents to sign the form, which outlines a series of punishments for lesser offenses as well for coaches or sponsors to administer.

Tomorrow night, Kennedy is scheduled to play Linn-Mar High School, a team that beat Kennedy last year at the State Final.

Blake and his parents as well as Head Coach Byron Ruggenstein have all declined to comment.

Athletics Director Frank Morton said, "This is a matter we are investigating closely."

On Jan. 25, police cited Blake at the home of Stephen and Cindy Smith, where 17 other people under 21 also tested positive for alcohol and were ticketed.

Sample Story - Day 3

Kennedy coach says Meyer will not play Parents plan to sue should suspension stand

Blake Myers, starting center and senior, will not play in the tonight's game versus Linn-Mar High School, a team that beat Kennedy in the State Final last year, according to Head Coach Byron Ruggenstein.

Ruggenstein's comments came during a press conference this morning in response to Myers's underage drinking citation last week. Allowing Myers to play, according to Athletics Director Frank Morton, who sat with Ruggenstein, would be in violation of the Code of Conduct form that all athletes and their parents must sign.

Myers, who did not attend the conference, is scheduled to attend court on Jan. 25 to appeal the drinking citation.

Ruggenstein said, "The case has brought quite a bit of media attention, and I feel it's in the best interest of the rest of the team for me to make this decision. Regardless of the outcome in court, it has not been disputed that Blake was at the party on Wednesday night, and even if he wasn't drinking, simply the decision to attend the party wasn't a good one. I need to treat Blake as I would any other member of my team, regardless of talent level."

Ruggenstein said his decision was merely a suspension for Myers and not an outright dismissal from the team. He said he would make a more definitive decision pending the outcome of the Jan. 28 hearing.

"This is a tough lesson for Blake," Ruggenstein said, "but I feel confident that we'll all learn something from this in the coming weeks."

In a press conference immediately following Ruggenstein's, Blake's parents, Charles and Claudia Myers, said their son was being unfairly criticized and they planned to sue the school should the suspension stand.

"We feel that our son has been unjustly singled out in this incident," Mr. Myers said in a prepared statement, "and we feel that this subsequent punishment from the school is unwarranted and excessive. Other students were also involved in this incident and they have not received the same scrutiny as Blake."

Eighteen KHS students were cited for underage drinking at the party on Jan. 19. Of those 18, in addition to Blake, two other 18-year-old students, John Smith and Mary Worthington, were ticketed by police.