



# INSIGHTS JOURNALISM<sup>®</sup>



## INTRODUCTION

**W**hen I was a journalism student at the University of Kentucky, I was hired by United Press International as a stringer to cover the Kentucky State High School Basketball Tournament.

It was my first professional journalism job. They gave me press credentials that let me sit on press row. I wore a tie. But best of all, UPI gave me one of their portable Video Display Terminals that allowed me to transmit my stories to my New York editors over the phone lines. I thought I was hot stuff.

In the early rounds of high school basketball tournaments, there are a lot of games and they play them back-to-back.

So after the first game ended, I started to write my epic masterpiece.

Ten minutes went by. Then 15. Then 20. By then, the next game had started and I didn't have more than a few paragraphs written.

And then my phone rang.

I answered and heard what sounded like the harshest New York accent I had ever heard. On the phone was Sal. Sal was the UPI sports editor assigned to edit my copy.

I later got to meet Sal face-to-face.

He wore a gray hoodie with the sleeves cut-off, and was never without an unlit cigar crammed into the corner of his mouth. He was gruff but fair...like a man who was curt not because this was his personality but because he simply didn't have time for niceties.

*Sal: "Kid... Where's your story?"*

*Me: "I'm working on it."*

*Sal: "Send it now."*

And he hung up.

I transmitted the few meager paragraphs I had and almost immediately, the phone rings again.

*Sal: “Kid... Here’s how you write a game story.”*

Then Sal proceeded to give me one of the best lessons in professional writing I’ve learned. In the span of 45 seconds, he taught me how to execute simplicity, clarity and relevance on deadline.

*Sal: “Write this down.”*

*“The so-and-so, so-and-sos (Insert name of winning team and mascot) defeated the so-and-so, so-and-sos (insert name of losing team and mascot) by a score of (insert score) at the Kentucky State High School Basketball tournament yesterday in Lexington, Ky.”*

*“Period. New paragraph.”*

*“The so-and-sos (insert name of winning team mascot) were led by (insert name of leading scorer), who had (insert key stats) en route to victory.”*

*“Period. New paragraph.”*

*“Insert quote from winning coach.”*

And so on. Sal went on to dictate the entire structure of a game story to me. All I had to do for the rest of the tournament was fill in the blanks.

That was a long time ago but I often think about that lesson. I still try to apply what Sal taught me that day. To not bury the lead. To write “tight,” which means simply and clearly. To be quick but accurate. And, most importantly, to understand the single most important thing your reader wants to know and put it in the first paragraph!

I’ve spent most of my career working not in journalism but in advertising and market research. But when it comes to reporting – the act of telling to others the story of the insights I discover – I’ve found that the lessons I learned as a newspaper reporter are the most important.

That’s why, at RealityCheck, we call our approach to analysis and reporting “Insights Journalism®.”

## WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

But let’s take a step back for a moment. Why should people who work in market research care about improving how they communicate their insights?

There’s one simple reason really.

Great insights will go unnoticed and have little impact if they are not communicated in a compelling way. People are moved by stories more than data points. Insights Journalism® is all about finding the story in your data that will maximize its impact within your organization.





## THE FOUR RULES OF INSIGHTS JOURNALISM®

In this overview, I'd like to share some of the lessons I've learned from my days as a journalist and how to apply these to reporting insights. I think of these lessons as rules for best practices.

- **RULE #1:** Write It (Before You PowerPoint It)
- **RULE #2:** Write It Well
- **RULE #3:** Rewrite It
- **RULE #4:** Start with a Great "Lead"

In addition to these Four Rules, this overview also will address different kinds of journalistic story structures that can be applied to reporting insights, and some thoughts on how to approach data visualization and graphics from a storytelling perspective.

But let's start with the Four Rules of Insights Journalism®.



RULE # 1

# WRITE IT



## **RULE #1: WRITE IT (BEFORE YOU POWERPOINT IT)**

We are plagued these days by what I'd call thinking in PowerPoint, which I'd argue is a lazy form of thinking.

*“Writing is thinking.  
To write well is to think  
clearly. That’s why it’s  
so hard.”*

– David McCullough,  
Pulitzer Prize-winning author

There is no better way to work through insights than by writing the story. Writing forces clarity. It forces you to connect concepts. The process of writing is linear and sequential. It won't allow you to make leaps of logic. It demands flow and coherence. Writing forces critical thinking like no other discipline.

So write the story first. Then translate that story to other “media” if you need to. Presentation decks, infographics, video and executive summaries all should come after you've written the story.

Now I know what you may be thinking: “I don't have time for this. My audience just wants bullet points or a single slide. This adds an unnecessary step.”

But this extra step will sharpen the summary slides you eventually create. And more importantly, through the process of writing, you'll discover connections you didn't initially see. You'll find that other parts of

your story don't hang together as well as you initially thought. And, once you're done writing, your slides and executive summary will come together much easier.

The bottom line: You can't summarize a story you haven't yet written.

You have to understand how all the parts of the story fit together before you can decide which parts to eliminate.

So start by working through the larger narrative. That process will reveal the coherent story you're after. Only then can you distill that story down to the concise, simple points required by PowerPoint or a 1-page executive summary.

*The author Joan Didion said, “Writing nonfiction is like sculpture, a matter of shaping the research into the finished thing.”*

I think that's a useful metaphor. Your data are a block of stone. Then you begin to shape and reshape. You chip away here, smooth there, until it expresses the central ideas you want to communicate.

## **GETTING STARTED: WRITE A LETTER TO A FRIEND**

One of the problems I think many of us encounter is simply getting started on the report. We immerse ourselves in our analysis. We

become mired in the complexities of data. When it comes time to write-up what we've found, we don't know where to start.

So here's a tip that will make writing that larger narrative less intimidating. This comes from my favorite journalism school teacher, Maria Braden. Maria told her students, when working on a complicated story, to put their notes aside and begin by writing a letter to a friend.

*“Dear So-And-So,  
I’m working on this  
really interesting story.  
Let me tell you about it.”*

Before you know it, you'll have the core of your story. Go back and remove the greeting, clean it up and then begin shaping, rewriting, elaborating, and adding your supporting data.

The same can be accomplished by simply talking to someone else, telling them the story of what you found, in a casual conversation.

In either case, you are freeing yourself – at least initially – of the formalities of the “research report.” You are letting your ideas flow. And, most importantly, you are forcing yourself to tell a story rather than report data.

The key here is to extricate yourself temporarily from the complexities of your data. Take a step back. Put the tables, charts, transcripts and notes aside. If you've done your analysis right, the story is in you



somewhere. You just have to begin to get it out. There will be time to incorporate data from your analysis to support your story later on. But you have to find the flow of your story first.

*The Sean Connery character in the movie Finding Forrester says, “You must write your first draft with your heart. You rewrite with your head.”*

I think that’s a useful way to think about it. When I start on a report, I often think to myself, “Just bang something out.” Get started. Get something on the page. Take the pressure off for now. Write a letter to a friend.

Now, I don’t mean to suggest that the writing process will be easy. You can use the “Letter-To-A-Friend” exercise to get started – but don’t be fooled. Writing is hard work, as is thinking. You’ll hit mental blocks that you’ll need to push through. But this process is worth it if you want to create stories from data that are compelling, relevant and motivating to people.

One of my favorite quotes about writing great stories is from journalist and author Gene Fowler:

*“Writing is easy. All you do is stare at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead.”*

## THE STRATEGIC STORY

At RealityCheck, our Insights Strategists write what we call a “Strategic Story” a week or so after the close of fieldwork. This discipline does a couple of things for us. First, it forces our Strategists to find the narrative in the data, to connect the dots, and to identify the most important elements of what we found in the research. Second, it gives our clients an early glimpse of where our story is headed so they can give us feedback and participate in the process.

Some clients choose to share the Strategic Story with their teams. Others use it as a tool to give us feedback on what themes in the story to dial up, dial back, eliminate or include.

We style these like magazine articles. And we write them that way. Bullet points are strictly outlawed at this stage! That’s because bullet points don’t force a linear connection of concepts and narrative themes the way complete sentences do.



RULE # 2

# WRITE IT WELL





## RULE #2: WRITE IT WELL

Whether you're writing a full, final report, an executive summary, presentation slides or call-outs for an infographic, your deliverables will be more impactful if they are well-written. Here are some important keys to good writing that can help make your deliverables clearer and more compelling.

### WRITE IN COMPLETE SENTENCES.

I'm amazed at how many research reports I read that are filled with sentence fragments and run-ons. Why is it important to write in complete sentences? Because it is directly related to Rule #1 above. Sentence fragments are very close to bullet points. They relax the constraints of logic and flow. Writing in complete sentences is harder, but it is worth it.

It also helps if you use proper grammar and correct spelling.

### KEEP IT SIMPLE.

Clutter is the enemy of good writing. Today, market research reports are littered with unnecessary words and inflated prose. This is usually done to make the unimportant and uninteresting sound important and interesting.

The best sentences are simple, with strong verbs, the right nouns and few, if any, adjectives or adverbs.

William Zinsser's *On Writing Well* is the best book ever written on professional, non-fiction writing. In it, he says:

*"The secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components. Every word that serves no function, every long word that could be a short word, every adverb that carries the same meaning that's already in the verb... these are the thousand and one adulterants that weaken the strength of a sentence."*

### USE ACTIVE VOICE.

What is active voice? It is a sentence in which the subject performs the action. Sorry to make some of you shudder with memories of grammar school English.

Basically, it's the difference between this, which is passive voice...

*It is recommended that a series of ethnographic interviews be conducted.*

...and this, which is active voice...

*We recommend a series of ethnographic interviews.*

You can feel the difference, can't you? Not only is the second sentence shorter, it is stronger, more assertive and more confident.

### BE BRIEF.

I used to have a boss in the newspaper business who'd say "Write right, write tight." This means be accurate and be brief. We all know accuracy is important in our business but so is brevity. When your audience consists of busy people, learning to convey meaning as concisely as possible is critical.

This doesn't mean leave important stuff out. But it does mean communicate what's important as succinctly as possible.

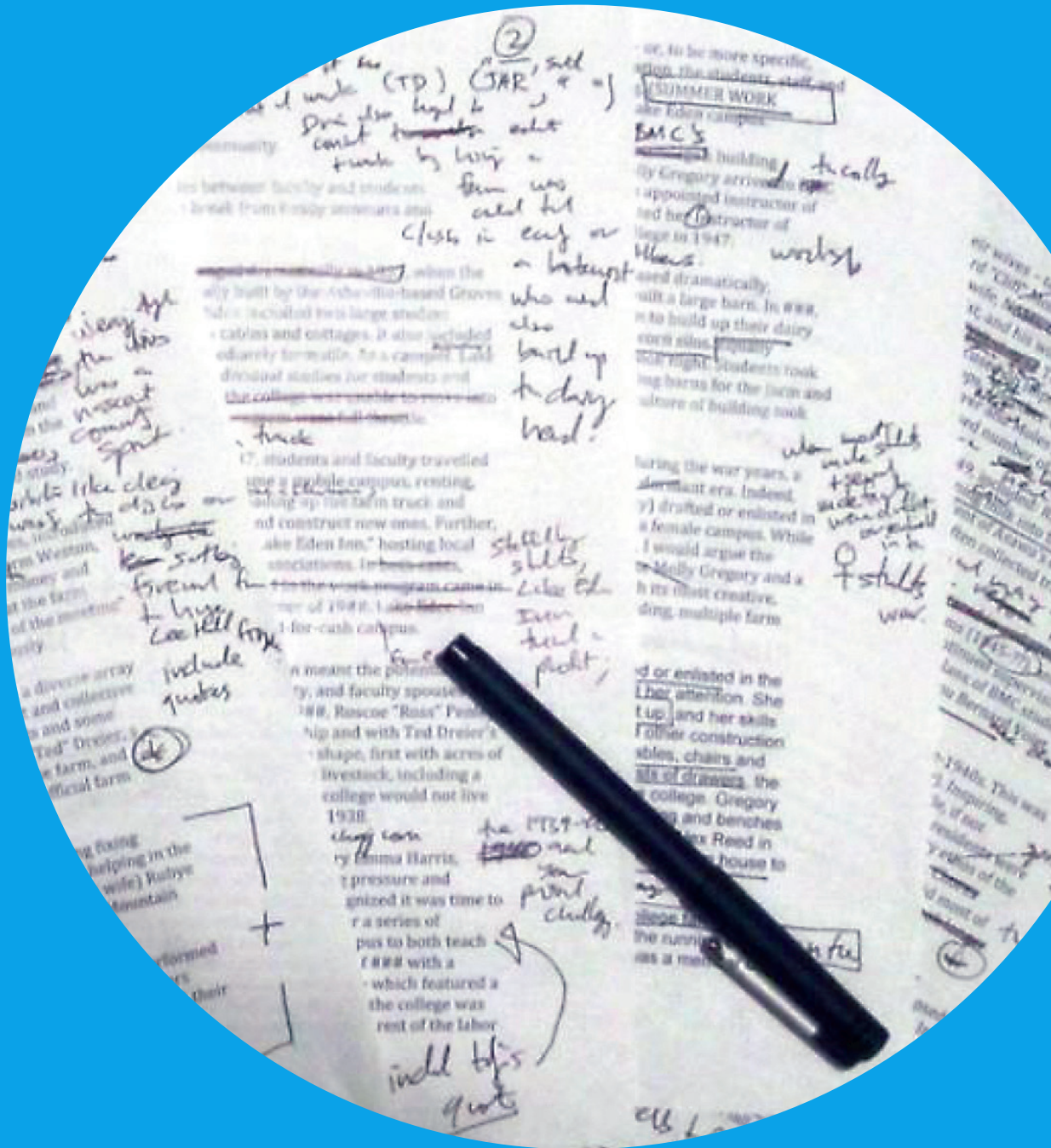
When I edit my deliverables, I look for opportunities to streamline. Can I distill three slides down to one? Can I distill three paragraphs down to one? Can I make a 10-word sentence a 5-word sentence?

So how do we apply these keys to good writing when we are working on our deliverables? Through the practice of rewriting.

Which leads us to Rule #3.



# REWRITE IT



## RULE #3: REWRITE IT

The craft of writing is rewriting.

You should go back over your writing multiple times, strengthening sentences, eliminating unnecessary words, replacing words that could be better, and creating better flow and logic.

When you rewrite, you're doing two things:

- Tightening
- Reorganizing

### TIGHTENING

Many of you, I'm sure, have heard a version of this quote before,

*"I would have written a shorter letter, but I did not have the time."*

– Blaise Pascal, French mathematician, physicist, inventor, writer and theologian

Brevity takes time. It takes effort. It's hard. I always chuckle when I get asked for a "quick topline report." If you do it right, a brief topline should take you just as long if not longer than a 40-page deck to write.

When you rewrite, question the necessity of every word. If it doesn't add meaning, eliminate it. Replace complex words with simpler ones that mean the same thing. Be sure to use strong, active voice sentences. In short, look for every opportunity to simplify, clarify and strengthen your writing.

### REORGANIZING

As I said above, the process of writing forces you to connect concepts logically. Points or insights that, in your mind, may have seemed connected will be challenged by the writing process.

As you write and rewrite, you'll find a need to move things around. You'll discover that what you thought were separate insights are really the same thing. You'll discover that concepts you thought were related really aren't. And you'll find concepts you thought were unrelated actually hang together well in your narrative.

The process of writing the long form story challenges the outline you have in your head. Writing is merciless in this regard.

So as you rewrite, reorganize until you find the best flow for your story.



RULE # 4

# START WITH A GREAT “LEAD”





## RULE #4: START WITH A GREAT “LEAD”

Nowhere are all of these rules more important to apply than to your first sentence, paragraph or slide. This is what journalists refer to as “the lead.”

Identifying your lead paragraph and writing it well are critical to capturing the attention of your audience and making people want to read or listen to the rest of your story.

Here is perhaps my favorite lead sentence of all time, appearing in the Onion the day after Barack Obama was elected to his first term as president.



**the ONION**  
AMERICA'S FINEST NEWS SOURCE · ONION.COM

NOVEMBER 5, 2008 · SPECIALELECTION ISSUE

WEATHER PAGE B16  
Single bolt of lightning in otherwise perfect day  
LOW 45 HIGH 61

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**WAR FOR THE WHITE HOUSE**

# BLACK MAN GIVEN NATION'S WORST JOB

WASHINGTON—African-American man Barack Obama, 47, was given the least-desirable job in the entire country Tuesday when he was elected president of the United States of America. In his new high-stress, low-reward position, Obama will be charged with such tasks as completely overhauling the nation's broken-down economy, repairing the crumbling infrastructure, and generally having to please more than 300 million Americans and cater to their every whim on a daily basis.

As part of his duties, the black man will have to spend four to eight years cleaning up the messes other people left behind. The job

see **BLACK MAN**, page 7

Now tell me that doesn't capture your attention and make you want to read more.

In six words, they've captured what happened, why it's meaningful and definitely hooked me into the story. The Onion is a satirical publication but damned if they didn't capture the essence of what happened in that election.

Here's another favorite lead.



It's a favorite of mine in large part because I wrote it. I published more than 100 articles in my brief newspaper career but I was particularly proud of this one.

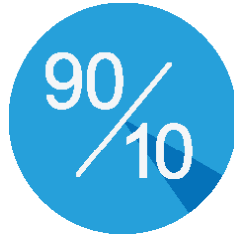
What makes this probably the best lead I ever wrote is its simplicity and good word choice. I used strong words that created a mental picture... wielding... clutching... tumbled... packed. These words are evocative but they also have the added benefit of being accurate. They were used by eye witnesses. They were the right words for the job – no more, no less.

First impressions are important in life and even more so when sharing your insights. Your opening slide, your opening sentence, will frame the rest of your deliverable for the audience. Make it strong. Make it have impact. And make it interesting.

## KEYS TO A GOOD "LEAD"

So how do you write a good lead? I believe there are three keys. A good lead...

1. Tells the audience something it doesn't already know
2. Addresses an issue that is relevant
3. Is interesting



**A good lead tells the audience something it doesn't already know**

One of my pet peeves is research reports that are written in the order of the questionnaire or the order in which fieldwork was conducted. The latter often happens in mixed-methods studies in which there are multiple phases of research.

But when practicing Insights Journalism®, you don't start your story with what you did first. You start your story with the "news."

In journalism, not reporting the new information first is called "burying the lead" and it's a sure-fire way to lose your audience at the get-go. You want to capture the attention of senior management reading an executive summary? Make sure your first sentence tells them something they don't already know.

**A good lead addresses an issue that is relevant**

Make sure the lead is about something relevant. New information that is irrelevant to the study objectives can create disinterest from the outset. The best "insights leads" report new information that are related to the study objectives. That is the magic combination.

*Your first paragraph, first sentence, first slide should simply and clearly describe the single-most interesting, new and relevant point to your audience. Period.*

At RealityCheck, we live by what we call the 90/10 rule. We focus 90% of our analytical efforts on the 10% our clients don't already know. I use that little formula to keep me honest. I'll ask myself, "Is this a 90/10 insight?" Is this a "10%" lead?

**A good lead is interesting**

This one is the most difficult and most subjective. Granted, if your insight is relevant and people don't already know it, it's probably interesting. But what can you do to dial it up from here?

The old adage in journalism about this is "man bites dog," which means that the occurrence that is unusual is more newsworthy than that which is commonplace.

And I'd say this is true too in insights work in a way.

The most interesting insights are those that challenge existing assumptions, cause the audience to see things from a different angle and provide a twist on the expected.

One of the greatest social science articles I've read provides some great insight here.

The article, written by Murray Davis in 1971, is called, appropriately enough, "That's Interesting!"

*"It has long been thought that a theorist is considered great because*

*his theories are true, but this is false. A theorist is considered great, not because his theories are true, but because they are interesting."*

*– Murray Davis, [That's Interesting: Toward a Phenomenology of Sociology and a Sociology of Phenomenology](#)*

Specifically, Davis argues that the greatest social theories of all time – including those by Freud, Marx, McLuhan, Durkheim, de Tocqueville and many others – are famous because they challenged existing assumptions.

*"A new theory will be noticed only when it denies an old truth, proverb, platitude, maxim, adage, saying, commonplace, etc.... All interesting theories... constitute an attack on the taken-for-granted world of their audience."*

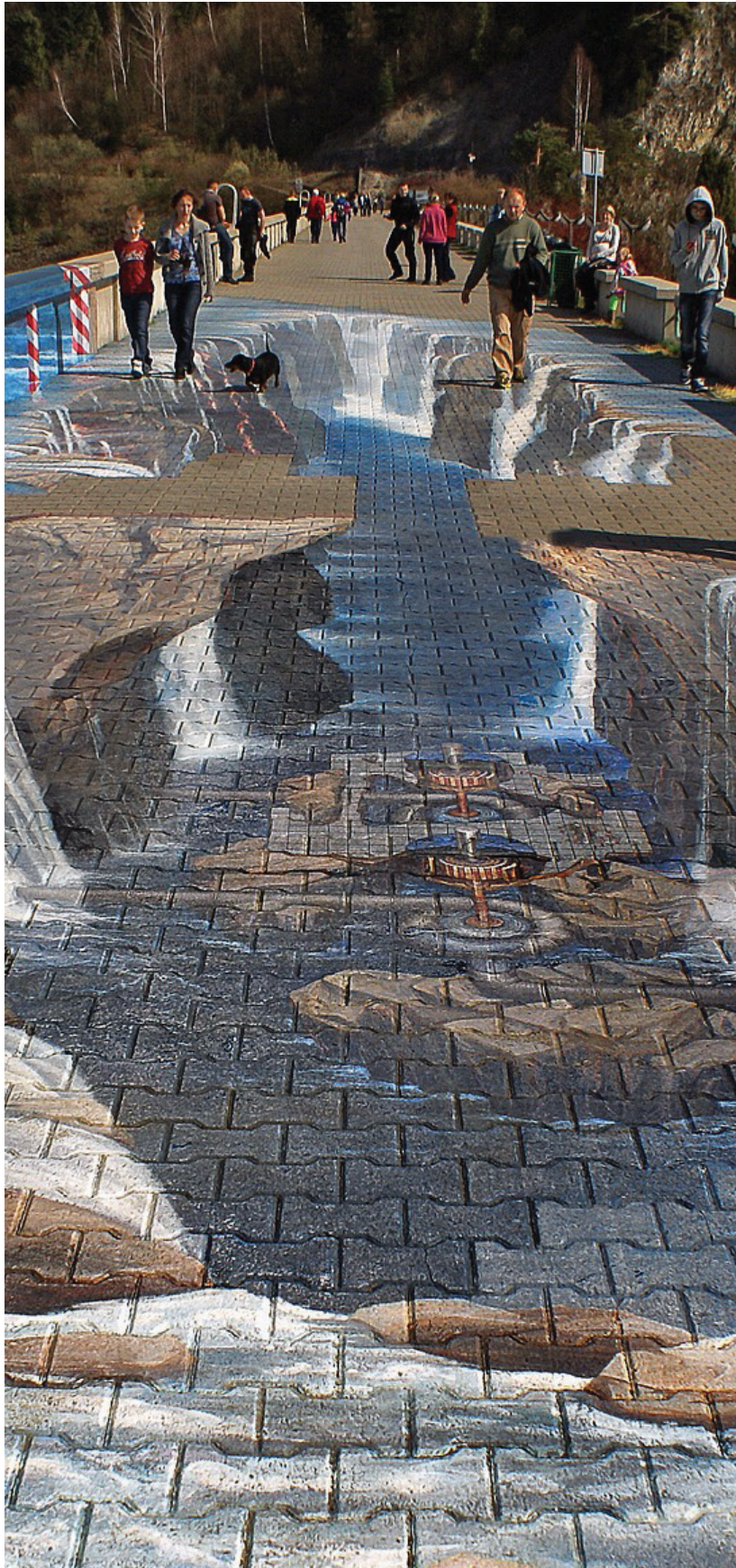
Davis suggests that most of these theories follow some version of this structure:

*What seems to be X is in reality the opposite of X.*

I think the most interesting, impactful insights follow this structure as well. They have a twist that challenges the audience's existing assumptions. They cause people to see something in a new way.







Why does anyone who was alive in the 1980s remember Gordon Gekko's assertion in the movie *Wall Street* that "Greed is good."? Because it is an interesting insight. It's interesting because it says what we thought was one way is actually the opposite.

## THAT'S NOT INTERESTING

Echoing points I've made earlier, Davis ends his article by talking about the insights that audiences will find uninteresting. He identifies three:

1. Insights that affirm their assumptions, to which they'll respond "That's obvious!"
2. Insights that don't address their assumptions at all, to which they'll respond "That's irrelevant!"
3. Insights that deny all of their assumptions, to which they'll respond "That's absurd!"

I think this final point is important. The reason why we talk about the 90/10 Rule at RealityCheck is because we assume that somewhere in the neighborhood of 90% of what we'll find in market research is already known. And that's okay.

*The most convincing research is 90% confirmation and 10% inspiration. Emphasize the 10% that your audience doesn't already know. Make it your lead. But be sure to include some of the confirmation, otherwise your story will not be believed.*



# STORY STRUCTURE



## STORY STRUCTURE

Now for a few thoughts about story structure. You may think that I'm suggesting there's only one type of story that applies journalistic practice to insights work... the Hard News Story. The Hard News Story is characterized by a direct tone and who-what-when-where-how-and-why lead. And while I do believe that most insights reports would do well to follow this story structure, there are at least two others that I think also can apply.

## FEATURE STORY (WALL STREET JOURNAL METHOD)

*The Wall Street Journal is famous for feature stories that begin with an anecdote, a description or other kind of narrative lead paragraph. Usually, these focus on a specific person or story that illustrates a larger trend, issue or point.*

A story about prescription drug addiction, for instance, might start off with a paragraph or two about one individual's struggle. Then, in what journalists call the "nut graph," it would bridge to the larger issue. "So-and-so's experience illustrates a national trend."

The Wall Street Journal Method is used to generate empathy and make a personal connection to what otherwise might be an abstract

issue. And you can use this approach the same way in reporting insights.

We often include anecdotes about the experiences of individual respondents to bring insights to life in a personal way.

One way to do this is include what journalists call a "sidebar," which is a story within a story. The sidebar accompanies the main hard news article and is intended to personalize it, make it more relatable and generate empathy among readers. These anecdotes have to be long. And usually they focus on the experience of a single respondent.

## NEWS ANALYSIS/ESSAY

News Analysis stories are similar to features in that they are longer and less direct than hard news stories. They also are different in that they often express the point of view of the writer. They are opinion pieces in which the author's expertise and analysis are part of the narrative.

In terms of structure, they introduce a thesis statement early on. Similar to a lead or nut paragraph, the thesis statement summarizes the core point of view or argument that the analysis is built around.

Here's a recent example from a RealityCheck analysis for a fast food chain in which the story unfolded like a News Analysis or Essay. The deliverable here was a PowerPoint deck. And this opening unfolded over a few slides. But I present it this way so you can see the narrative structure in one place.

*Today, families are under siege and pulled in different directions. Schedules are crowded and calendars are full. Parents and kids multi-task. Work follows parents home. Homework and extracurricular activities demand more time of children. And personal digital devices demand attention from everyone in the family.*

*The traditional family dinner has become the casualty. The overwhelming nature of work and home life challenges old meal models and dinner rituals.*

*But in some households, the family meal has adapted and evolved. It has shifted from the authoritarian to the democratic. In these households, mom enlists the help of everyone in the family to share responsibility in planning and executing the family meal. Food is no longer the hero. Instead, dinner is about time together and everyone being equal and full participants in the moment. Families work together and make food choices that help them get to their family "us" space as quickly as possible.*



# DATA VISUALIZATION



## DATA VISUALIZATION

Data graphics also can be important storytelling devices. And in an age when audiences demand quick synopses of findings, good data visualization can be essential.

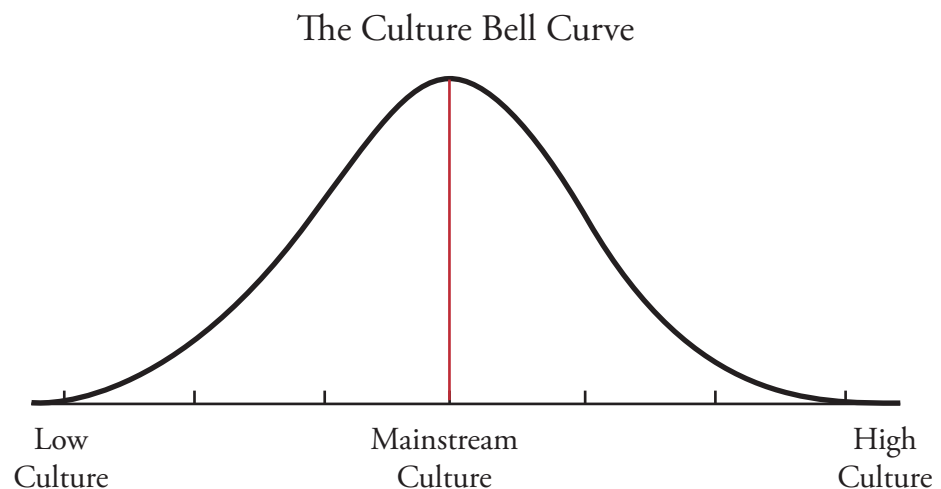
And even though data graphics rely on visuals as much as words, they too can tell stories in powerful ways.

So how do we create data graphics that tell impactful stories? First, I believe that many of the rules discussed above apply to data visualization. Using simple visuals and avoiding visual clutter help make graphics clear and impactful. Second, most data graphics do include some written descriptions. Headers, captions and explanatory paragraphs should be crafted according to the rules discussed above.

But third, I think the strongest data graphics lend themselves to storytelling. They either possess a narrative flow themselves, pulling the “reader” along an illustrated narrative path, or they provide a visual structure for the story that flows throughout the report.

## THE USE OF VISUAL METAPHORS

One way to do this is to use visual metaphors. Visual metaphors draw on familiar concepts to illustrate key insights in memorable and motivating ways.

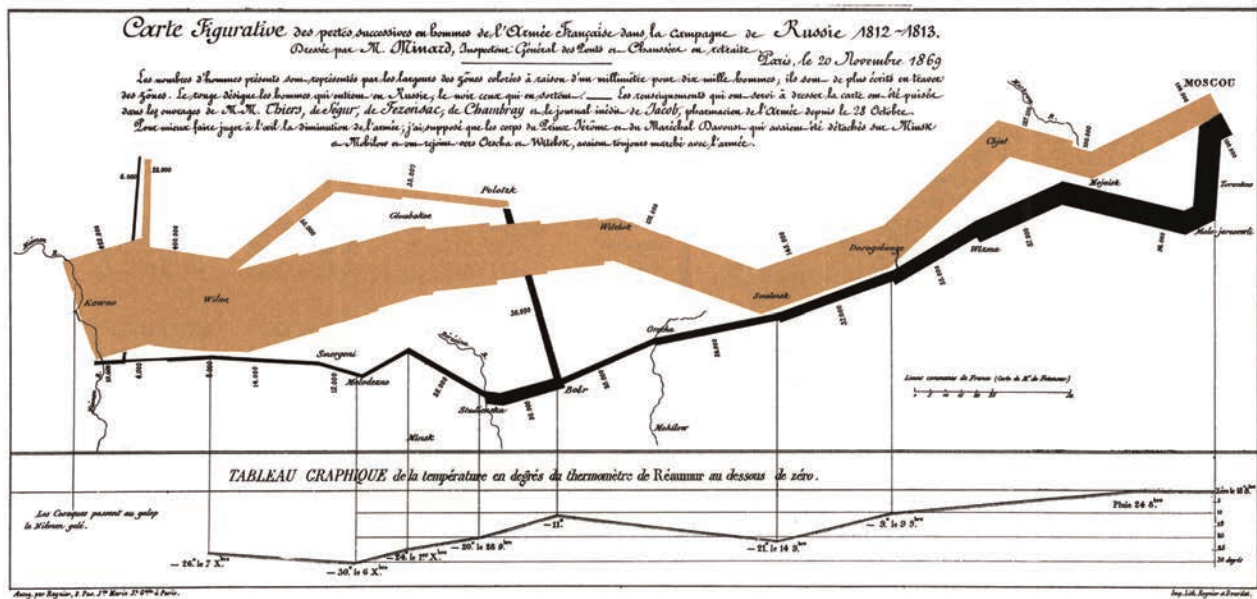


For instance, in a project for an alcoholic beverage manufacturer, RealityCheck used the visual metaphor of a bell curve to explain the perceived relationship between brands, fashion, music, television shows and celebrities among young adults. Our “Culture Bell Curve” gave the client a familiar and memorable framework for understanding where trends come from among young, urban adults. We found that trends tend to emerge from the High Culture and Low Culture “tails” of the bell curve.



Anything perceived to be near the median of the curve was associated with mainstream culture and did not appeal to trendsetters.

But perhaps the best example of the use of visual metaphor in data visualization was by French engineer Charles Joseph Minard. His cartographic depiction of numerical data on a map of Napoleon's disastrous losses suffered during the Russian campaign of 1812 has been called the greatest data graphic ever drawn.



Minard could have reported the data – troop size of the advance and retreat, time, location and temperature – in a simple table. But displaying all of these data together on a map – using the visual metaphor of a journey – tells the story of Napoleon's failed campaign in compelling fashion.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

If there's one important lesson from this discussion I'd like you to remember more than any other, it's that writing is thinking. Insights Journalism™ will make your analyses better – no matter what your final deliverable – because it forces a clarity and depth of thought that is unrivaled.

I can't tell you the number of times that the insights and conclusions I had in my head before I started writing changed as I wrote, sometimes significantly.

But Insights Journalism® will not only make your work better. It will make it more noticed inside your organization. The greatest insights are pointless unless they are recognized as such by stakeholders. And getting them recognized is best accomplished by communicating them in clear, concise and compelling stories.

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## PARTNERS



### JIM WHITE

#### FOUNDING PARTNER

Jim White started his professional career as a newspaper reporter and, in many ways, has never stopped thinking like a journalist. He still digs “to find the story.” He believes that good research, like good reporting, is about finding “the lead” – that single-most important insight – and conveying it in a simple yet compelling narrative.

Jim W. has 20+ years of experience in consumer insights, marketing and brand strategy. As an advocate of online qualitative research and analysis, he has been instrumental in the design and development of Aha! and analytical approaches for RealityCheck. He holds a doctorate from Northwestern University in Communications Studies and has taught courses in Communications Research Methods, the Psychology of Attitudes and Persuasion, Popular Culture and Brand Strategy.



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