UNIT- 4 : WRITING AND REPORTING ON SCIENCE

UNIT STRUCTURE

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4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to

- describe the process of writing Science Communication.
- discuss the writing of Features and Articles on Science

4.2 INTRODUCTION

After introducing Science Communication in the previous units we are going to discuss in this unit the method of writing in science communication. There are various ways of presenting science communication and a detailed account of the methods of writing science news and reports is given in this unit. Writing of science news and writing of features and articles have been discussed here to offer a comprehensive description of the essentials about science reporting.

4.3 WRITING SCIENCE NEWS

Science and technology is increasingly shaping and revolutionizing our everyday lives. Nowadays, we just cannot possibly think of our lives without the contributions of science and technology. So in that case the common public need to know what scientists are doing and their inventions and other technological advancements. Science is often hard to comprehend. Science news is difficult to digest for common people. Most people think that the difficulties of science arise out of necessity and out of the extreme complexity of scientific concepts, data and analysis. Complexity of thought need not lead to impenetrability of expression. As a result, science writing as a different genre has evolved. To know how to write the science news, you

must refresh your knowledge on news writing, which we have discussed in the first year of BMC.

Science news writing is a skill that every science communicator or journalist is required to develop and hone it with experience. There are certain techniques or parameters upon which news writing is based. And every news organization follows these basic techniques despite the fact they may all have individual styles of news presentation. The very first step towards learning this technique is to learn the structure of a science news story or news report.

Structure of a Science News Story

In the most basic sense, a science news report has the following elements:

Headline: You all must have been familiar with the term 'headline'. It is that part of a news story which first catches the eye of the reader. As you can see in the examples, it is the title of the news story and it is the most visible element. It is always written in a font few sizes bigger than the rest of the news story. The headline identifies the reader's area of interest and introduces and summarizes the story. It is usually after reading the headline that the reader decides whether or not to read the rest of the story. Sometimes headlines try to create curiosity through interesting use of language and prompt the reader to read the full story. There are different types of headlines based on nature and significance of the story. As you know science is not much interesting for the readers. So, to attract a reader to read a science news story the headline should be attractive.

Byline/ Creditline: The byline on a newspaper or magazine article gives the name, and often the position, of the writer of the article.You must have seen in the newspapers that below the headline, on the left hand side, a name of a person is written and some time the source is also written. This is called the byline or the credit line and it identifies the source of the story. If the person's name is written, then it is called the byline. If there is no mention of the person's name, but simply that it is from a staff reporter, then it is called the credit line. It could also be 'by our correspondent' or 'our bureau' or 'by our special correspondent' etc as applicable.

Dateline: Below the credit line or byline, just before the actual news story begins, you would have seen the date of the story along with the name of a place. This is the dateline. The date mentioned is the date on which the event has taken place and on which the reporter has filed the story and the place mentioned is the place from where the reporter has filed the story.

Lead or Intro: Just where the dateline ends, starts the main part of the report. The first paragraph of the news story is called the lead. It is usually written in bold or in a font larger than that used in the rest part of the story. However, this varies from publication to publication. The lead usually tells the story in a nutshell and gives the important information, particularly the most important of the 5W's and H.

Body: It gives the elaborate details of the event including all the 5W's and H and the related explanations of the event. The body is the part where the actual story is narrated. The body describes what the story is all about. Usually the lead provides just the gist of the actual event, the body gives a description in order of importance of information and finally the story is drawn to an end with a concluding paragraph, probably threading the important parts of the story or giving a general conclusion.

Of all these **elements**, the most powerful element is **the lead**. Because it is the **lead or intro** that leads one individual into the news story. So, let us now discuss the qualities of good introduction:

- The 'intro' is the most important part of any news story. It should be direct and attention-grabbing. It should contain the most important aspects of the story. The details are covered later. It should be short and arouse the interest of the reader or listener. Normally it should be one sentence of not more than 20 words for print media, and fewer for radio and television. ➢ The intro should be based on the most newsworthy aspect of the story, the essence of the story, the sharpest angle of the story. Hence the intro should be kept short (ideally around 40 words), uncluttered and relevant to the main story. The intro should make the reader want to read the rest of the story. To write an intro, you must first decide what makes the story a news. There may be several things which are newsworthy in the story. But, you have to identify and decide which is the most important or the sharpest angle of the story- it is at this point that your professional skills will face the test. If you pass the test, we can say you have written a good intro.

  In this way, your readers or listeners will be provided with the most important information straight away. Even if they stop reading or listening after the first one or two sentences, they will still have an idea of what the story is about.

- Another point to note is that you should not try to give too much detail in the intro. The six main questions which journalists try to answer are– Who? What? Where? When? Why? And How? And these will all need to be answered in your news story, but all of them need not to be answered in the intro.

The Inverted Pyramid style

News stories are constructed in the **Inverted Pyramid style** in order of importance. This is a formula used by all media organization. Inverted Pyramid style is mostly applicable to hard news stories and most hard news stories follow this structure religiously. However, on rare occasions feature stories and other soft stories can be written in this style as well. In this style the most important points of a story are told in the beginning, that is, in the lead itself, followed by the body in which the rest of the relevant information are presented in descending order of

interest or order of importance. Of course in this style there is no conclusion. The most important or interesting facts are arranged in the lead or immediately after the lead and the least important points are narrated in the end.

A science news story is expected to follow the principle of "5 W's and H". And according to the Inverted Pyramid structure, the lead or intro contains the most important of the 5 Ws. The less important Ws and the H is answered in the body. In the process of writing the news care has to be taken that once the intro captures the essence, rest of the questions are to be addressed in the following parts of the story. If these questions are not addressed adequately the reader/viewer/listener will not get his or her curiosity fully satisfied:

Generally, this standard technique is followed while writing the news. If the news is to be classified in the form of straight and interpretative reporting then, it can be said that the first four Ws- Who, What, When and Where- reflect the hard facts of the story (straight news or the hard news) and while answering the- Why and How -an element of interpretation is introduced. In this context it is important to mention that contrary to the "hard news" the concept of "soft news" pertains more to the background information and it attempts to capture not only the event but also the process that goes behind the happening of an event.

The concept of "soft news" is also associated with the emergence of infotainment when all news, at times, are treated as "soft" to the extent of entertaining. In nutshells, we can say that hard news is "event- centric" while the soft news is "process centric"; hard news is 'hard event' and soft news can be a feature capturing human angle of the event. Another differentiation can also be that hard news is spot news or breaking news, because the news organizations break out the news as soon as it happens, without delaying.

How to Write the Copy

Now that we have learnt about the structure of a news story, let us now deal with actual news writing, which is, in journalistic terms, called 'writing the copy' or 'copy writing'. If we understand the basic principles for writing each of the elements that make a news story, we will be able to write the entire news story easily and with confidence. So, let us deal with them one by one.

Principles of News Writing: In this section we are giving the principles of News writing in general which also apply to the writing of science news.

- **Headline:**

The headline has to be written keeping in mind that it not only introduces and summarizes the news story, but also serves the purpose of attracting the reader's attention. As such, it has to be crisp and precise, must clearly give an appropriate perception of the story, and should also convey the maximum meaning by using the least number of words. Here are a few basic rules for writing good headlines:

1. Build the headline around a strong verb

2. Avoid articles and helping verbs like a, an, the, is , are, were etc.
3. Never use the feel of the past. Use present tense and future tense Use active voice. It helps cut out extra words and also helps give the feel of the present.
4. Do not over abbreviate. Although headlines permit limited space, do not , in any case, use arbitrary or rare abbreviations.
5. Mention the subject in the headline wherever it is known. If the name is known, then use the name, otherwise use another title that identifies the subject.
6. When certain parts of direct speech are significant enough to be used in the headline, then it is put in quotes. Unlike the use of double quotes in the main body of the news story, in the headline, only single quotes are used.
7. The 'period' or 'full stop' is not used at the end of the headline.
8. The headline should always try to summarize the story and highlight the most important/striking element in it.
9. While attempting to write attractive/smart headlines, clarity of information should not be compromised.

- **Byline/ Credit Line**:

Different newspapers follow different rules for writing the byline or credit line depending on their own **style book**. Credit lines within the same newspaper may also vary. Some of the common styles are – 'by a staff reporter', 'from a staff reporter', 'from a correspondent', 'by our special correspondent', 'by our reporter', 'from our correspondent', 'by Manosh Das', 'from Bikram Mitra' etc. Some newspapers omit the words 'by', 'from' etc. They simply write 'our correspondent', 'Manosh Das', 'Bikram Mitra' etc.

Usually, it is placed on the left hand side of the report, below the headline. In some cases it is kept left aligned, while sometimes it may be aligned centre above the first paragraph.

- **Dateline:**

In almost all cases, the dateline has two parts — the place and the date. The place comes first, and then comes the date. For example, 'Guwahati, April 7'. However, some newspapers now-a-days have started omitting the dateline also, or only mentioning the place in the dateline. This is done mainly in case of feature news or other soft news stories where the time element may not be very significant. It is also done when there are multiple editions of the same paper where the news item may be carried on a different date.

- **Lead**:

Usually the lead should possibly be containing all the elements- the five Ws and an H. However, in some cases when it is impossible to club all the elements in the lead then the rest of the elements should be carried in the next paragraph. But the reporter must try to include as many elements as possible in the first paragraph itself. If the incident is

big in terms of effect and importance then it becomes difficult to incorporate all the elements in the lead itself, as it may end up cluttering of the lead. In such a situation, the body should deal with the rest of the elements, mostly the 'why' and 'how' elements.

However, when it comes to detailing the event in the body of the news story then the inverted pyramid style is followed invariably, where the more important points are told in the beginning, followed by the lesser important details.

Therefore, in a way, the lead summarizes the story in three to four sentences. Ideally, the lead should not contain more than 30 to 40 words, within which the summary of the event should be given. And within those 30 to 40 words the lead should attempt to contain all the five Ws and an H as much as possible. Otherwise normally the 'how' element is carried forward to the following paragraphs in the body as it deals with detailing of the story.

- **Body:**

As stated earlier, the body is the middle part of a story and it deals with the detailing of events. After having summarized the story in the lead, still many relevant points are left to be elaborated regarding the story which the readers might be interested to know. And this is done in the body part.

Similar to the lead, the body is designed using the inverted pyramid style. That is, playing down the facts in chronological order of importance and relevance. The most necessary aspects are highlighted in the beginning of the body followed by the lesser essential facts, in a descending order.

However, since the body deals with the description of the event, most of the readers get wary of reading the whole detail and skip to other news item, having skimmed through the lead. But a clever writer would know how to retain the interest of the readers until the last line of the story. For that the writing should be interesting and beautifully treated so that the readers find it hard to leave it half way through. Also the reporter should always attempt to say more with fewer words due to space restriction in newspapers.

One has to remember that one basic feature that differentiates news from other write ups is its language. Here are a few very basic guidelines to be followed in case of the language of news.

1. Always use very simple language and short sentences.
2. Avoid the use of complicated words, metaphors, figures of speech, adjectives and clichés. Explain technical jargons of science and technology.
3. Write in active voice wherever possible. It makes sentences shorter and direct.
4. Spell numerals up to 9 and beyond that write in numerals.

5. Identification that follows a name, viz., age, address, job description or any other information is to be set off by paired commas. Honorific titles like Mr., Mrs., Dr. etc are not to be used.

6. While reproducing speech directly, place it within double quotes unlike in the headline where it is placed in single quotes. Sometimes