News Writing Handbook for Extension Workers

John M. Ryan
Foreword

As an extension worker, you will find that the newspaper editor may be your strongest ally. The power of the press to educate people as well as influence them, is greater than most persons realize.

Your job as an extension worker is educational; it is your job to give information to the public.

The newspaper is one of the best media available for reaching the rural audience. To help you write for your newspaper, to help you conform to its standards, we have prepared this News Writing Handbook.

This is a handbook of style. The style suggested here is not the only good style—it is not necessarily book style or letter-writing style. It is, however, the style that most South Dakota newspapers use. By using this style, you will be saving time and labor for the editor—for every story that does not conform to the newspaper’s style must be changed by the editor.

Use this handbook as a guide to utilizing the opportunity your newspaper offers. A few stories printed each week about your extension work—4-H clubs, programs, demonstrations, organizations, recommendations and campaigns—will show the people of your county that you are doing your job; that the appropriation given extension is well-spent in your county.

Compiled, 1939, by John M. Ryan, extension editor
Revised, 1943, by Jerry Doyle, radio and publicity specialist

This book is punched for your convenience. We suggest you hang it where it will be handy for constant reference.
Preparation of Copy

All material being prepared for publishing is called copy.

Since most small newspapers do not have a large enough staff to rewrite your extension copy, it is necessary that your copy be clean, accurate, well-written and easy for the linotype operator to follow. To serve best your newspapers—weekly and daily alike—follow copy preparation suggestions closely.

Copy for newspapers should always be typewritten. Handwritten copy is inexcusable except in emergencies.

Copy should be double-spaced. This allows space for editors to edit the copy, making changes, corrections and additions.

Copy should be written on one side of the paper only. Leave a margin of one to one and one-half inches.

Copy does not require headlines. That is a job for an editor. Your headlines, in all probability, would not fit. Further, editors like to maintain individuality by using original heads. If copy needs a title or identification, write a slug-line in the upper left corner. A slug is one or two words which explain what the story is about. Also the upper left corner is the place for the source of the information: Agricultural News, Bon Homme county extension office—For release: Thursday.

Copy furnished to several newspapers may be duplicated by carbon only if the carbons are clear. If carbon copies are the least bit smudgy, it's better to retypew the story.

Ends of stories should be signified by an end-mark: -30- or ###.
Capitalization

It has long been the style for newspapers to use as few capitals as possible. In preparing the copy, use the down or infrequent style of capitalization.

Extension Service, Titles, etc.—In general, newspapers write extension in lower case. (In book style or letter style, however, it would be Extension Service.) Write: South Dakota extension service; John Miller, extension Poultryman; County Extension Agent Jacob Willey; Extension Poultryman John Miller. (Capitalize title if before the name, not after.) Do not use capitals promiscuously to name extension projects, as Home Life Project, Cooperation Demonstration Plot. Write them with small letters.

Names of organizations, societies, clubs, etc.—Capitalize the distinguishing words in these names. The common group words should be down: American Automobile association; Hi Neighbor 4-H club; First Baptist church. When the common word precedes the name, it is capitalized: Band of New York; Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Titles—Capitalize all titles preceding proper names: President Lyman E. Jackson, Director John V. Hepler, Professor Donelson.

Do not capitalize titles which follow the name: G. A. McDonald, extension animal husbandman.

Names of national, state, county or city bodies, buildings, boards, officers, etc., are not capitalized: depart-
ment of agriculture, senate, post office, county commissioners, city hall. When referring to a hall such as Boyce Greeley building, the proper name is up or capitalized.

**Abbreviated names of government agencies**—Write the capitals, no spacing or periods: FSA, USDA. Also follow this in writing the names of radio stations: WNAX, KOBH. Never K. O. B. H.

**Sections of the country**—Write East and South only when referring to a section of the country. But write points of the compass (west of town) in small letters.

**Abbreviations a. m. and p. m.**—These are always written in lower case.

**Titles of books, lectures**—The principal words should be capitalized, including “A” and “The” when at the beginning, otherwise, no: “The Value of Good Sires.”

**College degrees**—Capitalize B.A., M.A., Ph.D.

**Geographical names**—Capitalize only the proper noun: Missouri river, Sand creek, Beadle county, Page township.

**College, University**—Do not capitalize the common words except where they precede distinguishing words: South Dakota State college, University of South Dakota, Central high school, George Washington university.

**Holidays and special days**—Capitalize the proper name of the day: New Year’s day, Achievement day, Mothers’ day.

**Streets, avenues, addresses**—Capitalize the distinguishing words only: Sixth street, Fourth avenue. Note: Write 711 Eighth street.
Nicknames of clubs and athletic teams—Capitalize such names: Jackrabbits, Jolly Beavers, Yankees, Gophers.

Names of religious denominations—Used either as nouns or adjectives, such names are capitalized: Methodist, Catholic, etc. All common religious terms are down, except Bible (which is the name of a book): scripture, gospel, biblical.

Names of nationalities and races—Capitalize: Irish, Chinese, Negro. When using as an adjective, write: negro.

Names of studies—Unless referring to a language, do not capitalize: chemistry, sociology, history, English, French.

Abbreviations

Names—Do not abbreviate Christian names: George to Geo., Charles to Chas.

Titles—Abbreviate the following titles: Dr. Mr. Mrs. Also compound military titles: Lt. Col., Brig. Gen., Adjt. Gen. (do not use “Mr.” with the full name: Mr. Leon P. Hartly; write Mr. Hartly or Leon P. Hartly). Do not abbreviate president or shorten it to “prexy.” Titles which may be abbreviated are Gov., Prof., Rev. Always write out the title if it appears before the last name only: Reverend Olson, Professor Cobb.

State names—South Dakota is abbreviated S. D.; S. Dak., is acceptable; So. Dak., is never used. States with five letters or less are never abbreviated. Never abbreviate the name of the state unless it follows the name of a city: Fargo, N. D. When writing names of
towns, the name of the state is used only when the town is outside the state—in this case, outside South Dakota: Watertown; Marshall, Minn.

**Months**—In dateline, months may be abbreviated. Otherwise names of months are written out. *May, June* and *July* are never abbreviated.

**a. m. and p. m.**—Use these abbreviations instead of "o'clock."

**Points of the compass**—Spell out except in addresses: *W. Fifth street.*

**Organizations**—Organizations should usually be written out the first time they appear within a story and thereafter they may be abbreviated: *American Federation of Labor, AFL,* etc.

### Quotations

**Conversation, statements, speeches**—Use quotation marks for all conversation and quotations from speech.

**Titles**—Use quotation marks for names of books, paintings, dramas, songs and magazine articles: "The Plough and the Sword," "Kiss the Boys Goodbye," "Mr. Five by Five."

**Miscellaneous**—Do not use quotes for nicknames. If it is necessary to set off these names use parenthesis: *Bob (Stretch) Schryver.*

Do not use quotation marks for:

- (a) Names of characters in books, plays, etc.
- (b) Names of newspapers and magazines.
- (c) Names of boats, trains, pets, etc.

### Punctuation with Quotation Marks

Commas and periods must always be inside quota-
tion marks: "Chick management," he said. "is important."

Colons and semicolons are placed outside the quotation marks: The first book he wrote was "The Life of a County Agent"; the second, "No Time to Play."

Use single quotation marks for quotes within quotes.

Put the interrogation mark and the exclamation point inside the quotation marks only when they are part of the material quoted: He asked, "What's your job?" But, was he voted "most likely to succeed"?

Use capitals at the beginning of quoted material when such material is complete in itself.

**Punctuation**

News style calls for short, terse sentence structure. Use more periods, less commas. Commas appear too frequently where no punctuation is needed. **Don't overuse commas.**

**Commas**—Use commas to separate words in a series except those separated by a conjunction: carrots, beans and corn. Do not use the commas between the name of a man and "Jr." or "Sr."; Lou Lehr Jr. Use a comma in such phrases as 5 years, 5 months; 5 feet, 10 inches.

**Colon**—Use the colon after a statement introducing a direct quotation of one or more paragraphs. Begin a new paragraph after a colon. Use a colon after "as follows:"

**Semicolon**—Use the semicolon to separate clauses where the clause itself is broken by commas and might be difficult to distinguish. In writing lists, use the semicolon to separate each item: John Barrymore, De
Smet, president; Lana Turner, Brookings, vice-president; Haili Selasie, Addis Abbaba, secretary; John Dillinger, Pierre, treasurer. Note that everything pertaining to Lana Turner is bounded by two semicolons.

Dashes—The dash may be used to set off parenthetical words, to denote an abrupt break, to indicate a significant pause.

Punctuation with parenthesis—Periods and commas should usually follow parenthesis. They belong inside the parenthesis only if they are of the parenthetical material. Thus: It occurred before the war (the first World War).

Punctuation of lists—Do not open a sentence with a list. Begin: Officers elected are Bonnie Baker, president; Bronko Nagurski, vice-president; etc. In extended lists of committees, use the following form: Executive—Douglas MacArthur, chairman; Eleanor Roosevelt, Ty Thompson, John Fatzahoon. Social—Ann Sheridan, chairman; Wendell Willkie, Dagwood Bumstad.

Figures

Spell out all numbers under 10; use figures for 10 and above—

EXCEPT:

(a) For figures of enumerations such as weight, length, measure, distance, degrees, price, time, score, capacity, age, etc. Examples: 5 weeks, 9 years old, 3 per cent, 5 quarts, 7 cents.

(b) Spell out all numbers when beginning a sentence.

(c) Numbers given in even millions or billions
should be spelled out. Example: *Approximately two million acres were purchased.*

(d) To avoid confusion when two numbers appear together, spell out the first. Example: *Ten 14-acre plots.*

Use commas in all figures more than 999 except in dates: *1,765; but, 1943.*

**Dates and Time**

Write dates thus: *Dec. 7, 1941.*

In writing time, use *a. m.* or *p. m.* (in lower case). *O'clock* is never used. Write *4 p. m. today; not 4 in the afternoon or today at 4 p. m.*

**Writing News**

It is impossible to include here a complete text for news writing. It is, however, possible to record tips which will help improve one's news writing.

1. **Be accurate**—A news story must be accurate. Identify all names used and check each one. Verify all statements. Check spelling. It is not enough to say *Mr. Jones of Pillsbury township.* It should be *J. W. Jones,* or *John Jones.* If first names or initials are not available, it is better to omit the name entirely. Names of married women should be written: *Mrs. Josef Stromme*—using her husband’s first name; not, *Mrs. Leola Stromme*—using her own given name.

2. **Be brief and to the point**—There are many demands upon an editor's space. Don't try to monopolize it. Write simple, easily understood mater-
ial. Do not complicate your copy with confused tables, graphs, indentions and layouts which might look good on a typed sheet—but which invariably will be difficult to set into newspaper type. Newspapers usually charge advertisers double for composing tabular matter. Do not write flowery, long sentences. Editors prefer sharp, concise news.

3. **Be original**—Avoid trite phrases. Use fresh verbs. Limit the use of "according to"; for example, use: Says, believes, declares, observes, maintains, contends, repeats, explains, urges, suggests, announces, points out, reports, asks.

"Stated" is formal and is frowned upon.

If an article requires too many identifications, it is sometimes better to use a by-line and eliminate any need for ties to the author.

Extension news releases can be brightened with occasional feature and human interest stories.

4. **Observe Deadlines**—Editors must keep their linotypes running all week. Agents can cooperate—and insure their material of getting set into type—by turning in copy Friday and Saturday of each week.

Agents with strong information programs set aside a definite time Friday or Saturday to prepare news releases. Nothing is allowed to interfere with this activity—it means contacting approximately 1,000 persons or more and cannot be slighted. Late copy may not be used.

Do not attempt to dictate news stories. Dictated stories become wordy and rough. Write news stories on the typewriter (or if in longhand, ask the
secretary to type it before sending it to an editor).

5. **Make copy attractive**—By using frequent paragraphs and many quotes, agents can make extension copy look "easy to read." That is important. Remember: The length of a paragraph on a typed sheet will appear more than twice as long set in a two-inch newspaper column. Direct quotes give life to news copy. Use them often.

6. **Use pictures**—Make use of mats furnished by the state office. If you have a good local picture, send it to the extension editor and ask for mats of it. As many mats as you need will be supplied free if you pay for the engraving from which the mat is made. This will cost about $2.50 for a two-column picture.

7. **Writing the lead**—The most important facts should be reported in the lead. Good leads seldom run more than 30 words—less, if possible. Pick the most important point, the one you want to emphasize and play it up first. Other lead facts should answer the 5 W's—who, what, when, where and why.

   The lead is the most important part of the story. Take time and do it well. Do not attempt to include too many facts in the lead or it will become clumsy. If necessary, leave one or two of the five W's for the second paragraph. Keep leads precise and sharp.

**Writing Reports**

Reports are too frequently written slovenly and haphazardly. Reports are to show results and should be well-prepared.
One extension director told his staff, "In writing your monthly report, are you reporting to your time-keeper? Do you say, I spent so many days at this and so many at that. Or do you report the things you have accomplished for the people you serve.

"One paragraph which shows how your extension teaching has helped one man or one family to better farming and better living—the goal of extension work—is worth many pages of how you spent your time."

Relation with Editors

Time spent in cultivating friendship with editors is time spent wisely.

A newspaper is a molder of public opinion and can easily influence sentiment either for or against extension work in any county. An editor can help you—and you can help the editor.

In return for the space the editor gives you, you can serve him by bringing him news from all parts of the county—about crop conditions, new buildings, improvements, storms, rains, social events, meetings and lots of human interest yarns.

You might carry a notebook to jot down things you see in your travels throughout the county. Then, when you meet the editor in his office or over a cup of coffee, you can give him the details and news. Ask him how you can help him.

Do not neglect the small newspapers. Each paper has its readers.
Adding Authority

Frequently extension workers are reluctant to write news stories in which their own names appear, saying "We can't be advertising ourselves all the time."

Extension members must realize that they are educators and they are employed to disseminate accurate informational material. They are authorities in agriculture or home economics.

It is an old newspaper policy that all statements of opinion or expression of belief require authority. Just anyone cannot say, "Hybrid corn is superior to open pollinated corn." Such a statement must be tied to an authority—a person whose opinion is worth something and can be relied upon.

Agents writing stories of recommendation should use their own names as authorities. People of the counties know the extension agents and have faith in their suggestions. It is wise, however, to vary the old tie-in phrase "according to." (For other verbs which can be used effectively, see the section on writing news.)

Releases do not require an authority tie for every statement. One in the lead, with a direct and an indirect quote within the story, is sufficient. Stories which require a great many identifications may be handled with the "by-line" method. Label an article "By K. C. Code, County extension agent" at the top and no further authority is necessary, unless it refers to subject matter outside of the person's field.

Simple statements of fact do not require an "according to." Brookings county had a big rain Tuesday, might be an example. Announcements of meetings, however, may use tie-ins with the one announcing it.
Miscellaneous Suggestions

Newspapers write *per cent*, not *percent*

Animals are *raised*; Children are *reared*

Do not over-use *per*. Write: *a week, a day*, not *per week, per person*

To change a number from the written version to a figure, circle it

Condense stories; don’t ramble

Use *farther* to express distance; *further* for other purposes

Do not abuse *according to*

Identify all persons

Be accurate

Do not split words at the end of a typewritten line

Avoid over-use of prepositions. *Hide of the cow*, is bad, *Cow’s hide* is better