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Agricultural Education Through News

Burton Seeker

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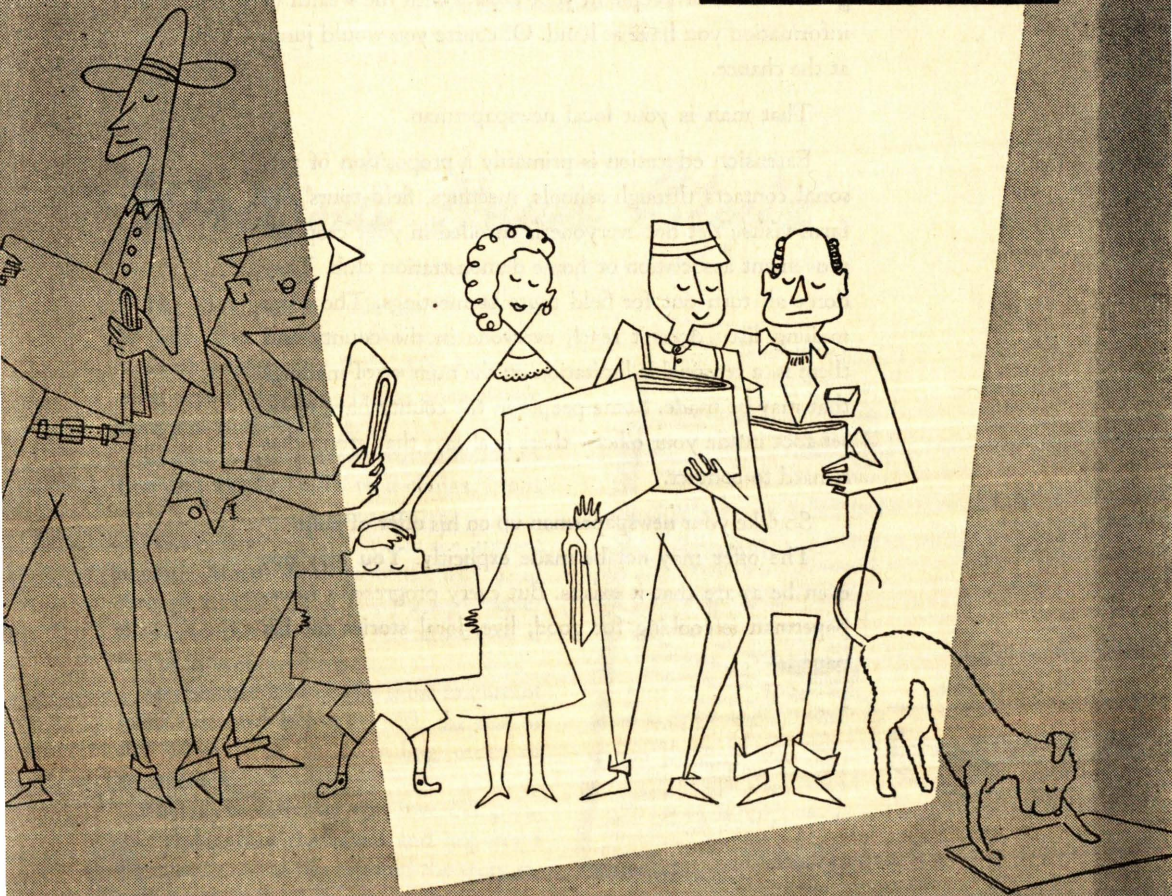
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agricultural education through

news



**AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE
SOUTH DAKOTA STATE COLLEGE
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**

If a visitor

came into your office and offered to influence a thousand people in your behalf, with no cost or obligation to you, would you take him up on it?

Your job is education. Your problem is reaching the great number of people in your county with the wealth of information you have at hand. Of course you would jump at the chance.

That man is your local newspaperman.

Extension education is primarily a proposition of personal contacts through schools, meetings, field tours and farm visits. Yet not everyone is enrolled in your crop improvement association or home demonstration club. They don't all turn out for field tours or meetings. The office mailing list doesn't reach everyone in the county and there is a reasonable limitation on the number of mailings that may be made. Some people in the county have never set foot inside your office—there is always that group that is hard to contact.

So take your newspaperman up on his offer of help.

The offer may not be made explicitly. You may not even be aware that it exists. But every progressive newspaperman is looking for good, live, local stories for his paper.

Agricultural Education

Thru News

BY BURTON SEEKER
Acting Extension Editor

Writing News Style

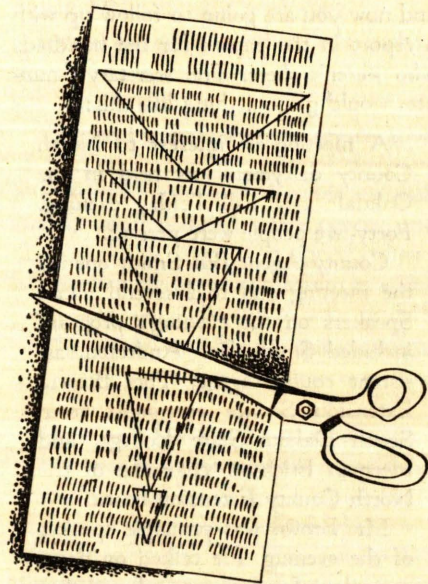
The basic part of your news work will be with the straight news story. News style of writing is a little different from other styles of writing but is quite simple once you understand it.

Literary writing starts with an introduction and slowly builds to a climax. News style is the exact opposite of this.

Newspapers are written for the hurried reader. Very few persons will read through to the end of every story—rather they scan the first few sentences to see if it is of interest to them.

So the rule is: put the most important items first and follow in with the rest of the information in decending order of importance.

Newsmen call this the inverted pyramid style, since the broad and important statements are at the top and the story tapers away as it continues.



There is another reason for the inverted pyramid style. Length of stories must conform to the amount of space available in a newspaper. Often you will be able to get a part of your story in but not all of it. When the editor needs to shorten your story he will cut off paragraphs from the end of the story. If the item is written in proper news style, this section will contain the least important facts and editing will not cripple the story.

So there are two simple tests for your stories:

● Can the reader grasp the point of the writing by scanning the lead sentence or paragraph?

● If the editor shortens the story by cutting paragraphs from the end, will principle points be lost?

Let's run through an example of this. Suppose that you held a meeting at which Tom Brown, Extension Service economist, talked on the prospects for dairying. Forty-five people attended the meeting and now you are going to follow up with a report in the papers for the hundreds who weren't there. The secretary's minutes would go something like this:

A meeting of interest to North County dairymen was held in the Oakdale city hall Friday evening. Forty-five people were present.

County Agent Bill Smith opened the meeting and told several jokes. Speakers on the evening's program included Smith, Bob Anderson, assistant county agent; Tom Brown, Extension Service economist from South Dakota State College, and Herman Erickson, chairman of the North County Extension board.

Mr. Brown was principle speaker of the evening. He talked on dairy operations for farmers and said that

the opportunity for profitable production next year looked very good.

Mr. Brown said the price of cattle feeds would decrease because of large surplus stocks on hand at this time. He also said that the demands for dairy products were increasing and market prices should be fairly high.

This looks like a good time to get into the dairy business.

A delicious lunch of coffee and donuts was served at the close of the meeting.

Perhaps it is stretching a point for the sake of an example but stories are submitted to newspapers in just this shape with discouraging regularity.

Dull and uninteresting, isn't it. It flunks both tests we mentioned earlier. Doubtless this effort would be failure since no alert editor would publish such a story. He might rewrite it but better not plan on that.

Try it this way:

Next year shows promise of being a profitable year for dairy operators, according to Tom Brown, Extension Service economist from South Dakota State College. Brown addressed 45 North County farmers at a meeting in the Oakdale city hall Friday evening.

He pointed out that surpluses of cattle feeds this year are causing feeding prices to drop. At the same time, demands for dairy products are increasing and the market outlook is strong, Brown told the group.

However, the economist warned farmers planning to go into the dairy business next year to buy only cows with high production records and to have the animals tested for livestock diseases.

"Even the most favorable market will not compensate for low producing animals or losses to disease," he said.

The program was staged by County Agent Bill Smith as a part of a series of meetings on the outlook for farming in 1955. Future meetings are planned to cover crop varieties, poultry prospects and garden vegetable recommendations.

See the difference! The first words give you the gist of it—next year's dairy outlook is promising. Suppose the last couple of paragraphs were cut off. We would lose the quotation which is only repetition for emphasis of the point on low production and disease losses. The last paragraph is worth mentioning but its loss would not hurt the story particularly since additional publicity will surely be given forthcoming meetings.

The Weekly Column

The regular column offers one of the best means of mass communication for a county agent or home demonstration agent.

The column in your local paper brings regularity and continuity into your news work. The restrictions of straight news re-

porting are eased, giving you far greater freedom of expression in presenting your material. Items that lack spot news qualifications and do not rate space in news columns can be well discussed in a signed column. Best of all, it permits the agent to let his personality and even his personal opinions filter into the material—this is impossible in straight news copy.

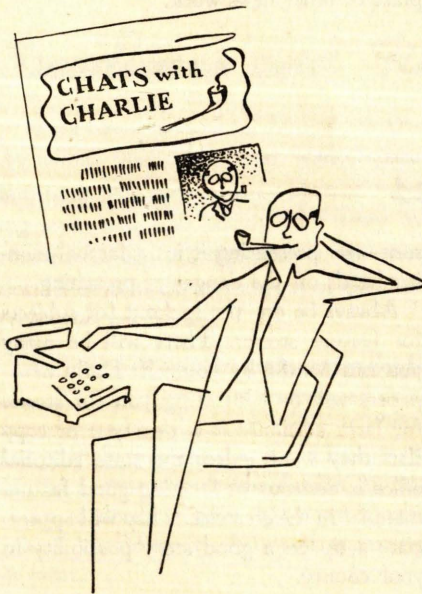
Before going any further, let's analyze the difference between a news story and the signed column.

The news story is a simple presentation of facts in descending order of their importance. Effectiveness depends on well chosen words blended into a concise and understandable story. The signed column is a much more personal medium in which you are speaking directly to your readers.

The agent who simply puts straight news copy into a signed column is missing the boat—badly.

Here are a few tips for your column:

Personalize it—Start at the top with an attractive heading. Select a name for it that sets it apart. Your editor will have a selection of type faces that can lend it distinction. Perhaps he will find an attrac-



tive illustration for you in his mat service. Use your picture in the column—either in the heading or as a half column cut in the body of your writing. You can order this engraving through the state editorial office at no cost.

Humanize it—Granted you may not be a potential Hal Boyle or Winchell but you can turn out good readable copy. Throw away your literature textbook and write your column just as you would say it. Let your personality flow into your column. Your readers will recognize it and enjoy it. The secret of the success of most of our top columnists is their ability to talk directly to their readers.

It is a good idea to lighten your copy from the dead earnest now and again—but don't take this as an invitation to try slapstick humor.

Vary your column—As a rule it is very poor to write an entire column on one subject. Keep your writing to the point and touch on several subjects so each reader may find something of interest to him.

But life isn't entirely a bed of roses for the Extensioner turned columnist. Agreeing to write a regular column carries responsibilities that should be weighed carefully before the decision is made.

When a newspaper editor agrees to allot space to you each week, he will depend on you to fill it with worthwhile copy regularly. If you want to remain in his good graces, and to hold the attention of your readers, you must prepare the column despite vacations, conferences or other conflicts.

It is possible for a column to breed a type of laziness into a news program. It becomes easy to fill the space required each week and feel that your obligation is fulfilled even though there may be good news stories that should have been exploited.

Writing a column does not take the place of other news work.

Feature Story Ideas

The type of copy perhaps most acceptable in the eyes of the newspaper is the news-feature. Here again there is latitude from the confines of straight news reporting.

The most common type of feature story that Extension personnel will be handling is the success story of the farmer or homemaker, who has incorporated improved practices into farm or home work and profited by it. The greatest benefit is that the lesson behind the story is plain to be

seen—yet presenting it in a factual manner heads off the danger of preaching.

Always be on the lookout for subjects for feature stories. There will be many you can handle by yourself. Daily newspapers will be contacting you for stories for farm editions. It is this type of copy that they want. Also, the state editorial office is desirous of locating good feature material in the counties. They will appreciate a tip on a good story possibility in your county.

Giving Data to Reporters

In some areas, particularly those covered by larger papers, the Extension office as well as some programs, will be covered by newspaper staff reporters. In this case, news coverage becomes a question of supplying the reporter with full and accurate information and doing it promptly.

Do not attempt to dictate the story to the reporter. He is trained in his work and will doubtless resent your interference. The best way to be sure of a good story is to become acquainted with this man and do your best to give him what he wants.

Often it may seem that newspapermen are unreasonable in demanding information on a particular happening before you have had an opportunity to collect it. What they are trying to do is to

meet their obligation of providing readers with up to the minute news. They are trying to get your story before the public while it is still fresh and worthy of good play.

Perhaps you will find that reporters will come to you for stories not necessarily related to the program that you are conducting. When you are recognized as a reliable source in this way, your news work is on a healthy footing.

Your work keeps you very close to the agricultural people of your area. You probably will find ideas for many stories that do not fall within your realm to develop. Give your reporter a tip on the situation. He can cover the story himself and will appreciate your thoughtfulness.

Deadlines and Time

There are two cardinal limitations under which newsmen must work—space and time. We have already covered writing style that will permit your story to conform to space limitations, in this section let us consider the impact of time on your news operations.

A newspaper operates under strict deadlines. The deadline is not an assigned time for copy to be submitted; rather it is the last possible moment that it can be turned in. As a general rule the further in advance of deadline time that copy is submitted, the better its chance of appearing in print.

In case of weekly papers, very often editors are in need of copy to keep their Linotype operators busy during the first part of the week. If your copy is in his office on Saturday or early Monday morning, there is a good chance that it will be given to the operator during this slack period. Once it is set in type, it will doubtless be used in the paper.

Gear your news time schedule to suit the convenience of the editor. The fact that Monday afternoon might be the most convenient time for you to write news has little importance when compared with the fact that editors cannot use copy written and mailed that late.

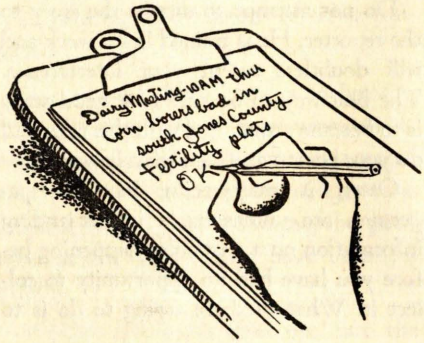
Your Sources of Copy

As an Extension Service worker, you are sitting on top of a vast wealth of news, feature and column material. There are reports of research projects released by the Experiment Stations and federal agencies, accounts of new crops or new practices being recommended, specialists offer current tips for conducting the farm jobs—but the best sources of copy rest with the people with whom you work and the activities that are conducted in your county.

The things you see as you travel your county, the questions that are asked and subjects discussed at farm meetings are the best source of grist for your news mill. Write about the things that are issues in your county. Dovetail your news program into the rest of your activities and make it a supporting force, not an extra chore.

Nothing is tougher than to sit down to write and have nothing to say. It's a tough job and the results are usually poor. Don't let yourself be put in this position.

A lot of agents solve this situation by jotting down column or news story ideas as they pop up. Another good scheme is to run through your calendar and note the farm jobs that will be underway at given times.



The point is, make your news work and your column reflect all of your work, not just a short time taken out for that purpose.

The Local Slant

Some of the news copy you will be handling will originate in the state editorial office or from other sources. To be of real value in your county papers, this copy must be localized.

This involves more than you delivering it to the paper in place of the mailman; more than simply writing in your name as the authority for the story. It needs a local slant.

Perhaps a story will concern the release of a new variety of oats. You could localize it by pointing out how this crop might do under growing conditions in your locality. If the story was a warning to take preventive steps against some weed or insect pest, you could report what the situation is in your county. If the story was a routine reminder concerning the use of a certain practice, you could bolster it with

a report of a local farmer who has been successful in using the practice. If a story deals with a series of meetings to cover the state, rewrite it and announce the meetings in your area in the lead sentence. As a general rule, the local angle added to a general story belongs in the lead.

Remember that localizing copy means local names and local situations. A Chicago paper once operated under a slogan to the effect that a dog fight on Clark street was of more importance than a murder in some other city.

Hang It On a Peg

A simple discussion of a recommended practice does not constitute a news story. Journalism textbooks insist that stories must have a news peg—or they must be “hung on a peg.” The term is a little vague but still worthy of consideration.

The news peg is the element of interest that will make a story appeal to the reader. A story on a missing child has a news peg since yarns on children in difficulty always find an audience. In the case of a convention at which the secretary of agriculture is

to speak, the peg would be the official's talk, since public appearances of important people are newsworthy. A story on alfalfa weevil control would find a news peg in the amount of damage the pests were doing in your county.

For your purposes, look at it this way: there is a reason why you feel your particular story should be served up to the public. Analyze this reason and you have your news peg. Remember to include this in your lead sentence or lead paragraph.

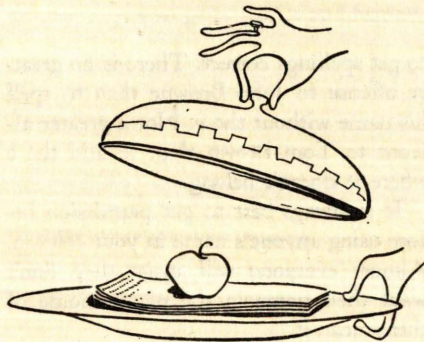
Preparation of Copy

The simpler forms of prepared copy are preferable to the newspapers. The only

rules, although important ones, are that the copy should be on dull finished paper, legible, and that space be left for editing.

Use an inexpensive paper for your news copy. Newsprint cut to 8½ x 11 size can be purchased from many newspapers and is ideal for this use. Stay away from costly bond papers and any sheet with a glossy finish. Onionskin is particularly taboo.

Handwritten copy is not acceptable in most cases—copy should be typewritten. Carbon copies are OK but be sure that they are legible. Mimeographing is widely used but has the disadvantage of suggest-



ing canned handouts rather than good live news stories.

Always leave adequate space for the editor's copy marks on the paper. Leave at least an inch on either side and at least two inches at the top of the page. If you run more than one story on a page, leave at least two inches between the stories since they will be torn apart and handled separately in the print shop.

If your story runs more than one page, signify this by writing "(more)" at the center of the bottom of the page. Always end a page with a paragraph break, never continuing a sentence to the next page.

And mark the end of your story. The most widely used symbol for this is "—30—"; although you may use your initials or some other symbol.

Don't Let Your Sermon Show

There is an object lesson in the tale among free lance writers about the woman who submitted a story to the publishers of a children's magazine. The story literally bulged with advice for youngsters. The editor rejected the manuscript and returned it to the author with a cryptic note. "Lady, your sermon is showing."

Obviously, the purpose of your news work is to influence people to adopt Extension-recommended practices.

But don't let your sermon show.

You know you can't get away with telling a farmer how to run his affairs in a meeting or a farm visit. By the same token you can't get away with it in the columns of newspapers.

Names are News, But . . .

Perhaps the oldest axiom of the news business is that names are new. This is true—but within certain bounds of reason. If a mere hodgepodge of names made good reading, then the telephone directory would be tops on the best seller list.

Bring names of people into your copy where they fall naturally and where they serve a purpose.

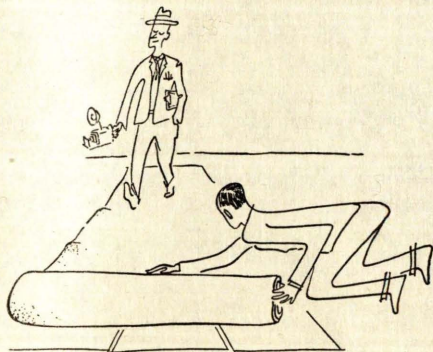
When you use names, be very careful

to get spellings correct. There is no greater offense to John Browne than to spell his name without the e. Nor a greater affront to Tom Brown than to add the e where it doesn't belong.

It is always best to get permission before using anyone's name in your column. Almost everyone will insist they don't want their name in the paper. Some of them mean it.

Relations With Newsmen

In a publication of this sort it is always correct to devote a goodly portion to relations with newsmen and their newspapers. This section should contain carefully sifted techniques for visiting them to show interest, but not too often so as to wear out your welcome; how to flatter him personally so he will be favorably disposed to printing your material; and how to impress upon him the importance of your stories so he will be "farm conscious" and do his part toward the prosperity of our state and nation.



All this is pure bunk.

A newspaper is a private business enterprise dedicated to making a profit. To do this they must print stories and features

that will interest readers and impress advertisers with the worth of their paper. There is no other reason for publishing anything in a newspaper.

The larger daily newspapers spend thousands of dollars annually in gathering news—through paid staffs of reporters, through expensive wire services and to hundreds of tipsters and correspondents who are paid for their services. In addition to this they must depend heavily on the copy submitted from sources such as ours to fill their papers with interesting and worthwhile material. Since they pay big sums to gain some news, copy that is prepared and submitted free to them actually constitutes a bonus for them. In the small weeklies, where the editors also double as reporters, ad salesmen, printers and bill collectors, the value of this type of copy becomes even more pronounced.

Yet there are many publicists vying for available space in newspapers. Competition is keen. The question then, becomes not one of "educating" editors to use Extension Service materials. Rather it is a question of turning out the type of copy that editors want. The type that will both please his readers and further the Extension program.

Oh, Yes He Will

Time and again the wail goes up: "but my editor won't print anything I give him. He just isn't interested in farm news."

If you feel that you face this situation, remember the story about the wandering Indian who insisted: "Me not lost; teepee lost."

George M. Cohen put it another way: "If your audience starts to cough during your big scene, don't blame the audience. Fix your scene and the audience will fix itself."

If you are having trouble with your news program, stop and examine it closely. Are you really giving your editor the type of copy that he needs? Is it interesting and newsworthy? Are you submitting prepared copy in good readable form that can be edited and handled readily? Are you getting it to him in plenty of time? Probably you will find some point where your program is weak.

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