



How to be a Good Source of Environmental News

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Near the top – often at the very top - of every well-written news story is what journalists call the nut graph.

It is the paragraph that succinctly answers this question: “Why should my readers care about what I’m about to write?”

If reporters don’t include a nut graph, good editors will demand it. In fact, good editors will demand to know the nut graph before the story is written – perhaps even before deciding to assign it.

Nut graphs are hard. They take time, a laser focus and an economy of words. But more than any element, they decide if a story gets produced and how it will be played.

If I was pitching a story to a journalist, I’d write my own single-sentence nut graph. I would memorize it and repeat it often throughout the interview. Everything I said and every document I provided would directly support that sentence.

I would make it as easy as I could for a reporter to answer an editor who demands, “Why should anyone care about this stuff?”

Understanding how journalism works and the hurdles that reporters face goes a long way toward getting a story covered – particularly those messy stories on the environment that are so difficult to explain.

Being a good reporter is a challenge. So, too, is being a good source. Both require cultivating relationships. Don’t wait for news to happen.

“A disaster is no time to be making new friends,” says Mark Schleifstein, environment reporter for the New Orleans Times Picayune.

Or consider this warning from Merritt Clifton, editor of *Animal People*, a newspaper that covers animal protection: “I always tell humane workers that dealing with the news media is exactly the opposite of catching feral cats. You can’t wait for them to come to you, because if you do, they will only come if they think you smell like dead meat.”

Here are some tips provided by members of the Society of Environmental Journalists on how sources can improve communication and the likelihood of getting a story covered accurately.

Kristen Kusek, Oceanus/InterRidge, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution

Limit your message to no more than three points, call reporters back, provide context.

“Pretend you’re talking to my great Aunt Helen, who thinks the fact that I work as a writer in ‘marine science’ means I work for Greenpeace. She’s thought this since I first mentioned marine science to her more than 15 years ago and still thinks I work for

Greenpeace. I do not and never will. In other words, do not assume prior knowledge, and err on the side of the Aunt Helen's of the world as you formulate your message. There are lots of misunderstandings out there, and it's better to be aware of them, addressing them head-on, rather than to ignore them and hope for the best.”

Audrey Cooper, reporter, San Francisco Chronicle

“I'd say the No. 1 thing is to put all measurements and data in perspective. Is the ppb measurement five times above what is allowed in drinking water or a thousand?”

Bruce Barcott, contributing editor, Outside Magazine

“One of my biggest frustrations is sources who seem unable to detach themselves from their cubicles and just meet me at the river/lake/field/shoreline, whatever, to talk about the issue on site. Being able to see what we're talking about, walk the ground, point to the landscape, etc, gives me ten times the information and understanding. I'm a notebook-and-pen guy, so I don't have the leverage of a camera crew to get sources out in the field, but I still need to capture issues in scenes, with dialogue/quotes, etc. Pull on your boots and let's get out there.”

And documents are an enormous help.

“I want 'em. I need 'em. Most stories I work involve two or more sides fighting over a creek, a river, whatever. Both sides have competing points. I'll hear you out, but I have to see backup. You say scientific studies back up your point? Show me the studies. That means give me a copy. Take 10 minutes and work the photocopier. Or at least let me have it for an hour so I can run to Kinko's. Don't assume I won't be able to read it. I will. Memos, too. E-mails. Anything on paper. Because I write a lot of chronologies, I'm a junkie for documents with dates.”

Jeff Kart, environment reporter, Saginaw (Michigan) News

“If you're an environmental group pitching a story, I need local angles and local people. It's not good enough to talk to the spokesman for the environmental group. I want a local person who has an opinion or is affected.

“If...you want to release a study, tell us exactly who conducted it and how it was conducted. Was it peer-reviewed? Who did the research? Does it build on other research?

“And when you're a scientist talking about your study, put it in laypeople's terms. Tell me why I should care, and don't be offended if I ask the question: Why should people care that windmills are killing x amount of birds, for instance. And don't use all the fancy terms - hypoxic and benthic, etc. Explain it to me, don't try to impress me with your degree. I know you went to school for a long time. Also, disclose and don't be offended if I ask you where the funding for the study came from.

“I need pictures to illustrate a story. If you're flying a Lear jet over the Great Lakes, taking infrared pictures of algae, I need photos of the jets (and) the infrared pictures.”

Nancy Gaarder, environment/energy reporter, Omaha World-Herald

From a panel of journalists that advised the Nebraska utility industry:

- Be aware of competition. If you want a great story in my newspaper, don't call the TV station first; don't send out simultaneous press releases. Call me.
- Be aware of competition. If the newspaper isn't interested, tell them you'll be calling the TV station. The newspaper may become interested.
- Pitch environmental stories based on impact. Find a citizen who is affected by the environmental harm.
- Explain the idea as if you are talking with your mom, Aunt Betty, grandpa.
- Don't get discouraged if reporters don't bite. They are overbooked. Legitimate stories don't get written. Keep trying.
- Try multiple paths. The same story can get into the newspaper through the outdoor, environment, home/garden, weather and briefs reporters.
- Double check facts, spellings, titles.
- Provide office, cell and home phone numbers and an email address so that reporters can check details anytime.
- Maintain good files. I may not call you when you send a release, but I might just call you when we're scrounging for a quick hit.
- Put facts-at-a-glance, budgets, maps, etc. on a Web site. Maintain an archive so reporters can refer to baseline information, especially during a disaster.

Amy Gahrn, journalist and media consultant, Contentious.com

Blog. You can tell your story directly to readers and also reach reporters.

“A lot of great sources are blogging, and also participating constructively in online communities. That makes them very findable, and establishes their expertise and relevance.

“I think the best general-environment communities for sources to start chiming in on are treehugger.com, worldchanging.com, and inhabitat.com. Those communities cover a wide range of topics, generally have constructive, thoughtful conversations and are very well-connected for search visibility. But there are others -- especially on various niche environmental topics.”

Jon Cooksey, television writer/director, producer of the documentary “How to Boil a Frog” (www.howtoboilafrog.com), on communicating with the public:

“Personalize things -- put them in human terms -- don't be afraid to talk about how it affects you personally. Talk to people like you're a human being, just like them, and not an expert, regulator, reporter, etc.

“Talk about how the news makes you FEEL. The point of enviro-journalism is to wake people up, engage them, alert them, and hopefully get them to take action. Information won't do that. People need to know it's OK to feel despair, fear, sadness, grief over the multiple awful things that are happening right now. So seeing a real human being having those feelings, and admitting to them, lets them take it in. Just as importantly, seeing someone who is an "expert" have those feelings alerts them that this is SERIOUS, and they need to pay attention. If the expert is calm, then they assume the problem is not serious and someone else will handle it.

“Be funny, even if it's gallows humor.

“Identify the people who are to blame, if someone is to blame. The world didn't get this way by accident. Not doing so is not only a moral lapse, but doesn't take account of human psychology -- people need to see a face. We've been so brainwashed about "finger-pointing" and the "blame-game" that we've become afraid to say the freakin' obvious, which is that some people act in very evil ways, that hurt millions of people, and could ultimately wipe out the human race.

“Faces, faces, faces. People respond to human faces. Look at the poster for 10 movies, and 9 out of 10 will be one big face. The 10th one will have a cute puppy.

“People also like puppies.”

Mark Schleifstein, environment reporter, New Orleans Times Picayune:

- Persevere. Understand that our relationship is not a one-time event. It may take a long time for you to trust the reporter and for the reporter to trust you.
- Be accurate, and make sure your message is clear before the reporter leaves. Don't exclude facts or take short-cuts. They'll lead to errors.
- Complain. Make sure reporters know when they commit errors. They could be repeated in future stories. Be clear if you want a response to your complaint.
- Respect and understand the rules. While there seems to be clear rules about what off-the-record or on-background mean in Washington, D.C., their meaning is often different elsewhere.
- Embrace my deadline. If I need information immediately, be clear whether that's possible. If it is difficult to meet deadline, let the reporter know fast.
- Be available. If you tell me you can't reach your boss, that's not necessarily going to keep me from trying to reach him. Don't get angry when I do.
- Be a generalist. My readers aren't stupid, but they may not be technically educated. Often neither are reporters. Avoid jargon and alphabet soup. Simplify concepts like when Richard Feynman explained the Challenger accident by dropping an O ring in cold water to show how easily it broke.
- Be patient. It may take several explanations before we figure out what you're saying. If you seem annoyed, the reporter may stop trying to understand.
- Sources talk about reporter with biases. Reporters talk about achieving balance. I've rethought both in the aftermath of Katrina. In New Orleans, we're reporting on issues where the bias seems clear – I've been reporting on the reasons for levee and floodwall failures in New Orleans for the past two years despite the fact that my house was destroyed by those failures. There's a clear potential of bias there. But there's no reporter in the city who doesn't have a similar bias, and we have to just deal with it – both sides. And I'm much more interested in accuracy than balance. I won't give equal time to two sides of an issue when one side is clearly wrong. It's like giving the crook equal time with the cop who arrests him.
- Reach out now to reporters and editors whom you might be working with during a hurricane or an epidemic or a terrorist event. Now's the time to bring them up to speed on how your agency works, what kind of information you have available.

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