

High Five

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Reporting and writing are connected. You can be an outstanding writer, but your story will be incomplete and lack punch unless you have done the reporting needed to answer all of the readers' questions. The details you gather during the reporting process are the building blocks you need to write a relevant and interesting story.

The High Five is a method for reporting and writing used at the Memphis Commercial-Appeal. It answers key reader questions at the top of the story for those with little time to read. In addition, it provides the details in the rest of the story for those who want to learn more. Thus, it serves all types of readers.

Reporting

Strong writing starts with asking the right questions during reporting and research. During your research, you must get the answers to the High Five elements. If you do so, you will have answered the key reader questions in every story. Interviewing/researching will be more purposeful using this method because you know what you need every time. The High Five elements are:

NEWS: What happened, or what is happening? What is new? This is the lede.

IMPACT: How does the news affect anything? How does it affect readers? A good quote often can help convey this.

CONTEXT: What is the background or setting for the event or trend? Put in enough background to provide a basic understanding for those readers unfamiliar with the subject and to jar other readers' memories about the past or related events.

SCOPE: What is the magnitude or scope of this event or happening? How many people are affected? Is this local event part of a larger, national set of events or trends? Does the national trend have a local angle? Numbers often fit best with this element.

EDGE: Where is the news leading? What happens next?

You might not get the answers to all of these questions in one interview. If not, you must talk to other sources or do a follow-up interview. Make sure you get all of the answers before writing your story.

Writing

Once you have gathered the information needed to answer all of the High Five questions, you are ready to write. The High Five also is a method for writing. **Using this method, you must answer all High Five questions no later than the fifth paragraph.**

This approach will allow readers who have limited time to get the gist of the story quickly. Their main questions will be answered at the top.

Generally, each of the questions can be answered in a sentence or two. **The entire High Five in most cases should be on the first page.** For this class, put the news in the first paragraph. A general guideline: Impact often can be a quote, which helps you get a human voice high in the story. When readers have enough of the basic story to understand what has happened or is happening, tell the readers the background so they can understand how the latest news fits in to the overall picture. Then, tell how many people were affected and how. Finally, tell readers what happens next. **News must always come first; the other High Five elements can be in any order.** In some cases, High Five elements may be combined in a paragraph. Context/Scope is common.

Do not try to cram everything in the story into the top five paragraphs. It defeats the purpose of the method. You are giving the basics to readers with little time so they can quickly get answers to their main questions. You have the rest of the story to fill in the details for readers who want to know more. After the High Five questions have been answered, provide a transition for readers and then give them the details in a clear and logical manner. Usually, you will start by telling the rest of the news. You can arrange the rest of the story in any way you like as long as it logically and clearly tells the story.

When you are finished, **label** the High Five parts. Label them at the end of paragraphs in capital bold letters in parentheses: **(CONTEXT)**. Make sure you have all of the parts in the top five paragraphs. If you have labeled anything beyond the fifth paragraph, you have not written your story in High Five style. Move up the wayward part.

HIGH FIVE CHECKLIST

Reporting

- Do you have all of the High Five questions?
- Do you know what the news is?
- Do you know the history of the news and the setting?
- Do you know how the news affects your readers?
- Do you know how many readers are affected?
- Do you know whether the news is part of a national trend?
- Do you know whether the national event has a local angle?
- Do you know what is going to happen next?

Writing

- Is the news in the first paragraph?
- Are all of the High Five elements in the top five paragraphs?
- Are all of the High Five elements on the first page?
- Have you labeled the High Five elements?
- Do you have a transition after the High Five elements?
- Are the details of the High Five elements discussed in the rest of the story?
- Do you have transitions between the details of those elements?