

How to Read a Newspaper

By Walter Cronkite



International Paper asked Walter Cronkite, for years television's foremost news anchorman, and an ardent advocate of the need for a free people to remain free by keeping fully informed, to tell you how your newspaper can help you cope better with your world each day.

If you're like most people you try to keep up with the news by watching it on television.

That's how 65% of us get 100% of our news – from the 24-odd-minute TV news broadcast each evening.

The problem – and I know the frustration of it firsthand – is that unless something really special happens, we in TV news have to put severe time limitations on every story, even the most complicated and important ones.

Get more than headlines

So what we bring you is primarily a front-page headline service. To get all you need to know, you have to flesh out those headlines with a *complete account* of the news from a well edited and thorough newspaper.

Is it really necessary to get the *whole* story? Dorothy Greene Friendly put it this way: "What the American people don't know can kill them." Amen.

News people have a responsibility. And so do *you*. *Ours* is to report the news fairly, accurately and completely. *Yours* is to keep yourself informed everyday.

I'll never forget the quotation hanging in Edward R. Murrow's CBS office. It was from Thoreau: "It takes two to speak the truth – one to speak and one to hear."

Take a three-minute overview

Here's how I tackle the paper. For starters, I take a three-minute overview of the news. No need to go to the sports section first, or the TV listings. With my overview you'll get there quickly enough. First I scan through the front-page headlines, look at the pictures and read the captions. I do the same thing page by page front to back. Only *then* do I go back for the whole feast.

The way the front page is "made up" tells you plenty. For one thing, headline type size will tell you how the paper's editor ranks the stories on relative importance. A major crop failure in Russia should get larger type than an overturned truck of wheat on the Interstate, for example.

Which is the main story?

You'll find the main or lead story in the farthest upper-right hand column. Why? Tradition. Newspapers used to appear on newsstands folded and displayed with their top right-hand quarter showing. They made up the front page with the lead story there to entice readers.

You'll find the second most important story at the top far left, unless it's related to the lead story.

Do you have to read *all* the stories in the paper? Gosh, no. But you *check* them all. Maybe the one that appears at first to be the least appealing will be the one that will most effect your life.

News is information, period

A good newspaper provide four basic ingredients to help you wrap your mind around the news: *information, background, analysis and interpretation.*

Rule #1 of American journalism is: "*News columns are reserved only for news.*" What is news? It is *information* only. You can tell a good newspaper story. It just reports the news. It doesn't try to slant it. And it gives you *both* sides of the story.

Look out for a lot of adjectives and adverbs. They don't belong in an objective news story. They tend to color and slant it so you may come to a wrong conclusion.

Do look for bylines, datelines and the news service sources of articles. These will also help you judge a story's importance and its facts.

As you read a story you can weigh its truthfulness by asking yourself, "Who said so?" Look out for "facts" that come from unnamed sources, such as "a highly placed government official." This could top you off that the story is not quite true, or that someone – usually in Washington – is sending up a "trial balloon" to see if something that *may* happen or be proposed gets a good reception.

Another tip: check for "Corrections" items. A good newspaper will straighten out false or wrong information as soon as it discovers its error. A less

conscientious one will let it slide or bury it.

An Upside Down Pyramid

Reporters write news stories in a special way called the “inverted pyramid” style. That means they start with the end, the *climax* of the story, with the most important facts first, then building more details in order of importance. This is unlike the telling or writing of most stories, where you usually start at the beginning and save the climax for last. Knowing about the newspaper’s “inverted pyramid” style will help you sift facts.

A well-reported story will tell you “who,” “what,” “when,” “where,” and “how.” The best newspapers will go on to tell you “why.” “Why” is often missing. And that may be the key ingredient.

Many important stories are flanked by “sidebars.” These are supporting stories that offer, not news, but the “why” – *background* and *analysis* – to help you understand and evaluate it.

Background offers helpful facts. *Analysis* frequently includes opinion. So it should be – and usually is – carefully labeled as such. It’s generally by-lined by an expert on the subject who explains the causes of the news and its possible consequences to you. No good newspaper will mix *interpretation* with the “hard” news, either. Interpretation goes beyond analysis and tells you not just what will probably happen, but what ought to happen. This should be clearly labeled, or at best, reserved for the editorial page or “op-ed” (opposite the editorial) page.

Form your own opinion first

I form my own opinion *before* I turn to the editorial page for the pundits’ views. I don’t want them to tell me how to think until I’ve wrestled the issue through to my

own conclusion. Once I have, I’m open to other reasoning. *Resist the temptation to let them do your thinking for you.*

Here’s an idea I firmly believe in and act on. When you read something that motivates you, do something about it. Learn more about it. Join a cause. Write a letter. You can *constantly* vote on issues by writing letters, particularly to your congressman or state or local representative.

To understand the news better, you can also read news magazines. Books help to fill in the holes too. During the Vietnam war, for example, many people felt that the daily news wasn’t entirely satisfactory. The truth is, you could have gotten many important new facts from the books coming out at the time.

Pick a TV story and follow it

Now that I’ve taught you the basics of getting under the skin of a newspaper, let newspapers get under your skin.

Tonight, pick an important story that interests you on the TV news. Dig into the story – in your newspaper. Follow it, and *continue* to follow it closely in print. See if you don’t find yourself with far more understanding of the event.

And see if you don’t have a far more sensible opinion as to the “whys” and “wherefores” of that event, even down to how it will effect you – and maybe even what should be done about it.

Keep up with the news the way my colleagues and I do – on TV *and* in the newspapers. Learn to sift it for yourself, to heft it, to value it, to question it, to ask for it *all*. You’ll be in better control of your life and your fortunes.

And that’s the way it is.

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