



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

HOW TO WRITE FOR FRONTLINES

Bureau for Legislative and Public Affairs

[NOTE: THESE NOTES ARE TO HELP USAID STAFF, CONTRACTORS AND GRANTEES WRITING FOR FRONTLINES TO BEST COMMUNICATE THEIR STORIES AND TO INTEREST OUR READERS. THIS WAS PREPARED BY STAFF WRITER ANALEED MARCUS ON AUGUST 25, 2008]

News Judgment: What Makes a Story a Story?

Focus on people rather than process. Stay away from listing which bureaus interacted and which projects were involved. Focus on immediacy, what has happened recently. The mission may have distributed millions of dollars of a product to date, but a hurricane has just come through. The millions of dollars become secondary. Tell the story through characters (beneficiaries, not just high level officials) and events. "Telling Our Story" (see USAID Web site) is a good example of this.

Writing Style Guide

Journalism is not academic writing. It does not have a thesis statement, long paragraphs, or an introduction. It gets to the point, considers the way people read, and what gets and maintains their attention. The way people read requires that an article be written with these necessary elements and in this particular format.

Journalistic liberties:

- You CAN start a sentence with "but" or "and."
- You CAN end a sentence with a preposition.
- You CAN have a one-sentence paragraph.
- You CAN use the word "said" repeatedly. Readers do not notice.
- A story CAN be about the fact that nothing has happened yet, a situation has plateaued, or an event was cancelled.

Limitations:

- Do not change a quote. Even if a non-native speaker uses English incorrectly.
- Do not give a fact without attributing it to a valid source, even if you must use "USAID officials said."
- Do not use "says," or such literary speak as "sighed," "demanded," "refused."

Mandatory elements:

1. Quotes

- a. Draw the reader back into an otherwise policy- and fact-riddled story
- b. Humanize the story, express emotions, show real people are affected
- c. Readers can see through bureaucratic quotes. Use genuine, spoken words.
(Adhere to the this format for quotes and titles)

Do: “Thanks to this program, I earned the respect of the people here,” said beneficiary Benadito Boeis. “They no longer see me as a handicapped person.”

Don't: “With the advent of the TFCA funding in 2001, PFB has been able to ensure that the security and protection of the RBCMA is now firmly rooted within its short and long-term management planning efforts,” Project Manager John Smith said.

d. If the person spoke it in a different language, say so. “Laith said in his native Arabic.” The reader will recognize that an internally displaced person in Ethiopia would not use the same words as a native English speaker.

e. Keep attribution at the end of the sentence:

Do not write:

Deputy Assistant Administrator John Smith said that the fiery wall of debris could have killed many if not for USAID prevention.

Instead write:

The fiery wall of debris could have killed many if not for USAID prevention, Deputy Assistant Administrator John Smith said.

2. Quantifying data

- a. Percentages, number of people affected, population data, demographic info, rough estimates are ok
- b. Age of anyone interviewed and included in story

3. “So-What” Factor: What’s the big picture? Who does it affect? Why reader must care.

Story Format

In general, an article should be loosely based on this structure.

1st Paragraph: Only one to two sentences under 40 words on who, what, when, where, why.

2nd Paragraph: Quote that supports the lead graph; Cite source, full name, age, title. Please quote local recipients of USAID programs. Stay away from quoting mission director or project manager who basically say “we did a great job.” Unless their quotes add some understanding to the story.

3rd Paragraph: Details, going from most to least important as story progresses

4th Paragraph: Second quote; Quotes should pepper story, to bring reader back to the reality that this is not just policy, it is real people, and why we do our work here.

5th Paragraph: More detail; Dates, times, biography of person quoted, person about to be quoted, policy breakdown, procedure, impact

6th Paragraph: Conclude with “kicker,” what is a quote or information with kick, with an impact, leaves reader with “wow” factor, or provides closure, but is NOT presenting a new idea and is NOT terribly important to story (otherwise it would go up higher in the story)