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Chip on Your Shoulder: Sharing the writing life with Chip Scanlan.

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The Nut Graf, Part I

Barney Kilgore was tired of today. He was sick of yesterday. And in 1941, he had the power to do something about it. "It doesn't have to have happened today to be news," he declared. "If a date is essential, use the exact date." From now on, he decreed, *The Wall Street Journal* would no longer use the words "today" and "yesterday" in the leads of stories. With that single act, Kilgore, the new managing editor of *The Wall Street Journal*, paved the way for a revolutionary treatment of news.

Journalistic story forms, like many creative ideas, are often linked with the places where they originated or where they reached their zenith. That's why the inverted pyramid, popularized by the newspaper wire services started before the U.S. Civil War, is often referred to as an "AP story" or a "wire service approach."

In the same way, *The Wall Street Journal* is home to a form best known as the "nut graf" story, although it is also identified as the "news feature" and the "analytical feature." This genre's hallmarks include anecdotal leads that hook the reader, followed by alternating sections that amplify the story's thesis and provide balance with evidence that presents a counterthesis. But its chief hallmark is the use of a context section, the "nut graf" in newsroom lingo. Now newspapers and magazines around the world publish stories following the form that emphasizes explanation over information and understanding over knowledge. Online news sites also rely on this form.

The nut graf tells the reader what the writer is up to; it delivers a promise of the story's content and message. It's called the nut graf because, like a nut, it contains the "kernel," or essential theme, of the story. At *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, reporters and editors called it the "You may have wondered why we invited you to this party?" section.

The nut graf has several purposes:

- It justifies the story by telling readers why they should care.
- It provides a transition from the lead and explains the lead and its connection to the rest of the story.
- It often tells readers why the story is timely.
- It often includes supporting material that helps readers see why the story is important.

Ken Wells, a writer and editor at *The Wall Street Journal*, described the nut graf as "a paragraph that says what this whole story is about and why you should read it. It's a flag to the reader, high up in the story: You can decide to proceed or not, but if you read no farther, you know what that story's about."

As the name implies, most nut grafs are a single paragraph long. In the following example, Julia Malone, a national correspondent for Cox Newspapers' Washington Bureau, begins her story about pork barrel politics with a specific case that illustrates how politicians use tax dollars for pet projects that have dubious value.

> Blacksburg, Va. -- High on a mountain overlook, construction crews blast through solid rock on a 20-hours-a-day rush schedule to build the first two miles of an expressway that, for the next few years, will lead only to a turn-around. -- *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

Malone then immediately provides the context for this scene and solves the puzzle of a two-mile-long expressway.

> But for promoters in this Appalachian university town, that's of little concern. Dubbed the "Smart Road" and designed to double as a high-technology research site, this federal-state project shows how a little "pork" tucked into a federal transportation bill can buy a whole hog for a community.

Wisely, Malone doesn't make her intrigued readers wait any longer to find out what the story is about and why they should bother reading it. The nut graf has done its job: given readers enough information early on to see where the story is heading so they can decide whether they want to keep reading.

Rookie reporters can use the nut graf form to good effect, too. Jeremy Schwartz, a reporting student at The Poynter Institute, used two short vignettes to begin his story about the problem elderly residents in a St. Petersburg neighborhood were having with Super Soakers, oversized water guns wielded by local kids.

In his lead, Schwartz described how Avita Berry, 62, watched as the occupants of a car "let loose with thick streams of water, soaking anyone unlucky enough to be in range," and Annie Lee, 72, saw a group of pre-teens open fire with massive water guns filled with bleach, "strong enough to turn her grass white."

Then it was time to step back from the specific cases and clue the reader in on the whole story:

> Berry and Lee are victims of a new urban weapon in South St. Petersburg: Super Soaker water guns -- high-powered, bubble-shaped, neon water guns that can extend to three feet and hold up to two gallons of water. They tell stories of guns filled with bleach, hot pepper and even garlic and say that neighborhood youths have taken the game too far. This summer has seen an explosion of Super Soaker use on the South Side, say residents, local retailers and police.

First, Schwartz identifies the women in the lead as representatives of a larger group: neighborhood residents victimized by Super Soaker water guns. Then, he anticipates the readers' question by immediately describing the weapons, using details that paint a vivid picture, and providing attribution so readers can assess the credibility of the assertion. Nut grafs often use summary language to bring together disparate events to reveal trends or long-running situations. "They tell stories of" specific examples -- "guns filled with bleach, pepper and even garlic" -- to convey a fad gone out of control.

The nut graf can be longer than one paragraph but in a news story I'd argue that they shouldn't be longer than two or three paragraphs. Longer than that, and the story can bog down.

What the writer needs to do instead is anticipate the reader's reaction, every step of the way. That's where the nut graf comes in, stepping back from the individual case or scene or person to show where it fits into a larger picture. As Jack Hart, editor and writing coach at *The Oregonian*, described so well, the nut graf is "a core statement that answers the basic question lurking in the mind of every reader: 'Why should I bother with this story?'"

Reporting a Trend: Deconstructing a Nut Graf Story

The nut graf form is ideal for stories that report trends. In the 1990s when I covered family issues in Washington for Knight Ridder Newspapers, I relied on it for a story about the alarming increase of preteen dieters.

In this story, the two-paragraph anecdotal lead is designed to draw the reader's interest: "Hey, I thought it was a story about a woman dieting, but actually, it's

about a kid who lost an alarming amount of weight. What's going on here?"

It's followed immediately by three paragraphs -- the nut graf -- that step back and describe the trend illustrated by the lead.

After the lead and the nut graf, the story consists of alternating sections, all designed to samplify the story's focus.

Section 1: Quotes from experts support the story's thesis and demonstrates that this isn't merely the reporter's opinion, but one backed up by authoritative sources.

Section 2: The story now provides balance by introducing a section that contrasts the problem of dieting children with the very real problem of obesity among America's youth.

Section 3: This chunk returns to the main theme of the story. It buttresses the thesis by citing medical evidence and experts. The last sentence provides a transition to the next section.

Section 4: The following section amplifies the nut graf. With statistics drawn from a medical study, it tells the reader about widespread dieting among young people.

Section 5: The next section shows another face behind the numbers. Nut graf stories should never rely on one example.

Section 6: In the following two sections, the story alternates between the close-up and the wide shot. Specific examples are always related to the larger context.

Section 7: The story comes full circle, returning to Sarah, the child in the lead. It avoids a common flaw: introducing a character in the lead who is never seen or heard from again.

Section 8: Now that the problem has been fully explored, the story concludes with a section designed to answer the question on the reader's mind: "What can be done?"

Many reporters, both students and professionals, have a hard time writing a nut graf. The nut graf requires the writer to summarize the story in a way that may seem like editorializing. It's not. The critical thinking and analysis that the form demands must be supported by rigorous reporting. The nut graf makes a case, but it must be supported by evidence. The story about pre-teen dieting is based on numerous interviews with children, parents, doctors, nutritionists, psychiatrists, and other health professionals and on extensive research of medical literature.

Magazine editors like Evelynne Kramer, formerly of *The Boston Globe Magazine* describe the paragraph as "opening the aperture." As members of a video generation, you may find it helpful to think of this form's lead as a close-up. The nut graf is a wide-angle shot.

Theme has been defined as "meaning in a word." In a nut graf story, it's the meaning in a paragraph.

William E. Blundell, a former *Wall Street Journal* writer who coaches writers, and whose stories illustrated the approach in its finest form, calls "the main theme statement the single most important bit of writing I do on any story."

The Wall Street Journal's approach redefined news, transforming it from events or actions that happened today or the day before to trends or situations that had been developing over time but that had not been noticed by a news media focused on the now. Most important, *The Wall Street Journal*'s reporters were following a new rule: Write a story that keeps readers reading rather than

provides a built-in excuse to stop, a complaint made by the inverted pyramid's critics.

At the same time, the nut graf required in every story served the function of the inverted pyramid's summary lead: providing readers with the gist of the story up high. If they chose to stop, they at least knew the broad outlines of the story. If they chose to continue, however, they knew they would be rewarded with even greater understanding and enjoyment.

A word of caution about nut grafs from James B. Stewart, a former *Wall Street Journal* front page editor and successful nonfiction writer: Don't let nut grafs tell the reader so much about the story that they have no incentive to keep reading. In his book, "Follow the Story: How to Write Successful Nonfiction," Stewart argues for nut grafs that accomplish the goals of the device, including "selling" the story to the reader by conveying its timeliness and importance while "preserving every bit of the suspense and curiosity so carefully cultivated in the lead." Stewart's guidelines to enhance rather than crush the story you want to tell include:

- Never give away the ending of the story.
- Anticipate the questions that readers might be asking early in a story, and address them.
- Give readers a concrete reason or reasons to move on.

Here's a quick way to produce a nut graf for your next story: Make up your mind what the story is about and why people should read it -- and then type that conclusion in one or two sentences.

Experienced reporters say they find it helpful to constantly write and rewrite the nut graf through the course of reporting the story. Doing so tends to reveal holes earlier in the process and helps you avoid too many intriguing but tangential side trips.

>>Coming Thursday: The Nut Graf and Breaking News

This piece was excerpted from "Reporting & Writing: Basics for the 21st century."

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