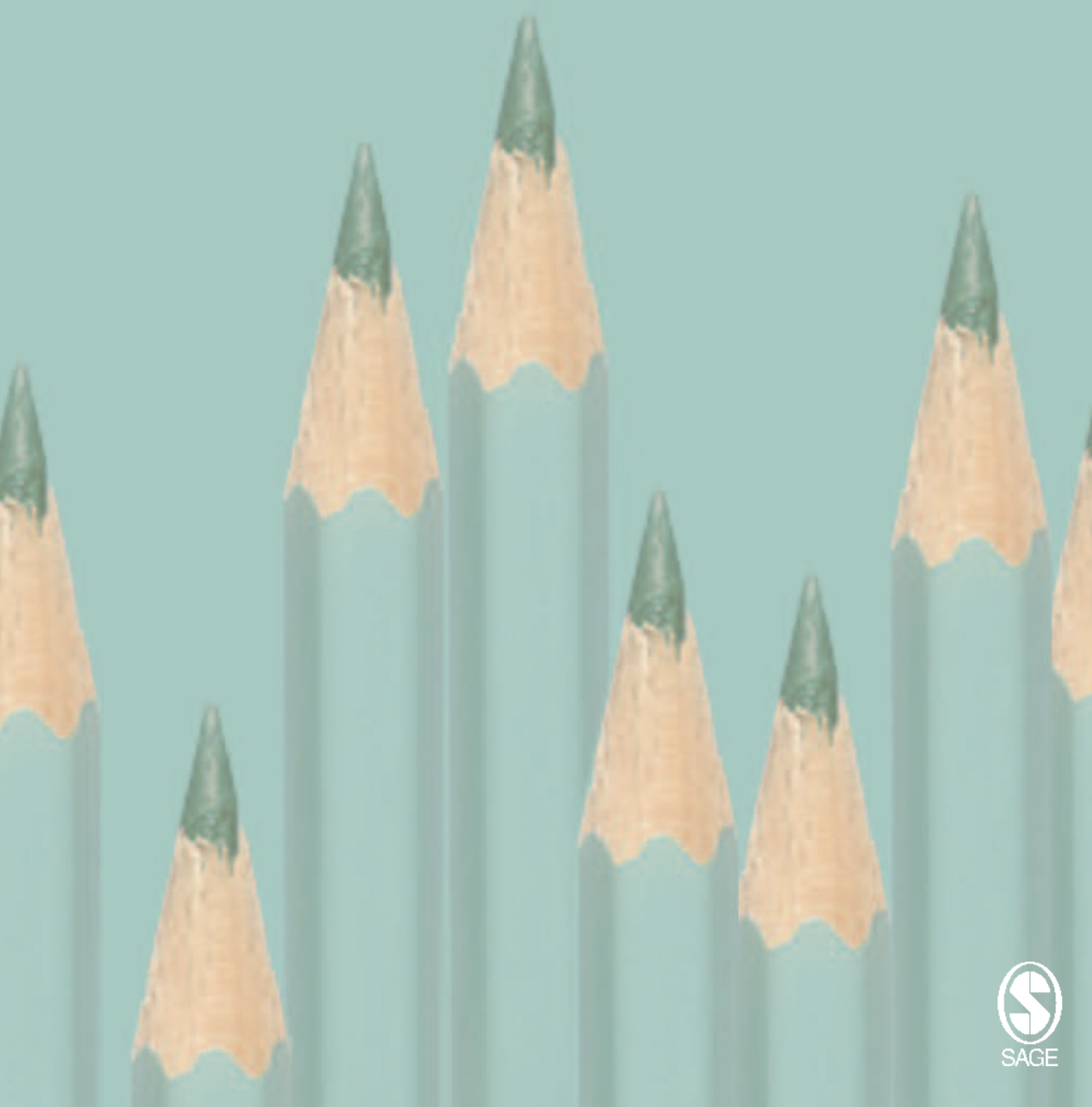


ANGELA PHILLIPS

GOOD WRITING FOR JOURNALISTS



Good Writing for Journalists

Good Writing for Journalists

Narrative, Style, Structure

Angela Phillips

 **SAGE Publications**

London • Thousand Oaks • New Delhi

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First published 2007

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SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B-42, Panchsheel Enclave
Post Box 4109
New Delhi 110 017

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-10 1-4129-1916-9	ISBN 13 978-1-4129-1916-6
ISBN-10 1-4129-1917-7 (pbk)	ISBN 13 978-1-4129-1917-3 (pbk)

Library of Congress Control Number 2006927540

Typeset by C&M Digital (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed on paper from sustainable resources
Printed in Great Britain by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My biggest thanks go to the writers who have donated their work. Without them, there would be no book. Everyone I contacted gave without hesitation and without pre-condition. Thanks also to the editors who gave me their time to talk about writing: Ian Katz and Claire Armistead, of the *Guardian*, Ian Jack of *Granta*, Hilly Janes from *Times 2*, Mary Hadar from the *Washington Post*, Marcelle D'Argy Smith from her experience at *Cosmopolitan*, Dylan Jones from *GQ* and all the very many journalists who have visited Goldsmiths to talk to my students about their work. Thank you also to the friends, colleagues and students who have read and commented on the early drafts: Judy Holland, Tony Downmunt, Ellie Levenson, Reva Klein, Laura Deeley and my daughter Rachel Sturrock.

INTRODUCTION

This is a book about the art of writing stories for newspapers and magazines. It is needed because, if the print media are to survive the internet age, they must evolve a distinctive role involving more than the basic skills of news gathering and reporting. Simple news stories can be done more easily and far more quickly via radio, television or the web. The future for print lies increasingly in the quality of writing or the depth of analysis. Newspapers are already moving in this direction. Where ten years ago the majority of features in a quality newspaper would be less than 1,000 words; today features of 2–3,000 words (or more) are not uncommon. Saturday and Sunday magazines proliferate, demanding well-written profiles and features. Balancing the increase in the length of features and profiles, there has been a massive growth in the number of short, personal and opinion pieces, some of them little more than 300 words, but all of them demanding fresh, original writing.

As Mary Hadar, a commissioning editor on the *Washington Post*, says: ‘These days so much of what ends up on the front page is a feature. Even when you are covering a war, you want to experience it, the feel of it.’ So, although this book concentrates on feature writing, it looks also at reportage and it includes pieces at full length because it is hard to get a sense of the shape and structure of extended features when all you get is a couple of paragraphs. In Part II of the book there are examples of writing that are powerful, memorable, colourful or funny, each with a commentary on structure, style and writing quality, encouraging readers to learn from the best practitioners. It is not meant to provide a blue-print for young journalists so much as a springboard. I hope it will inspire and encourage those who want to make their writing individual and memorable because it is this skill which will really mark out those who are most likely to ‘make it’ in a world over-crowded with information. To quote Hadar again:

I was always watching other newspapers and magazines for a distinctive voice. Maybe a young writer doesn’t recognise their own voice. You have to push them a bit. Push them on to the high wire without letting them fall.

But the book isn’t only about writing. It is also about how stories are framed and constructed. It challenges the assumption that journalists merely

report, impartially, what they see and hear (perhaps with a few literary techniques thrown in). It recognises that most newspapers and magazines recount events within the context of existing narratives of the world, which necessarily colour, not only what they report, but how they report it. This approach to the news has until recently remained firmly fenced into the section of the world labelled 'media theory'. Practitioners have attacked it for undermining the very values upon which the profession of journalism is founded. It is used here for two reasons. It will help students of journalism to understand how stories are constructed. That will make them better writers. It will also arm them with an understanding of how easy it is to accept a one-sided account as 'the truth'. By understanding how competing cultural narratives work, young journalists will perhaps be a little better equipped to resist pressures to conform, and may in turn help shape new and more inclusive narratives for the future.

Journalists have to be good narrators in order to hold attention in a world in which information streams unceasingly through our daily lives (written, visual, sound, or all three). Their job is to carry messages not just about things that we need to know in order to get on in the world, but also about who we are and how we are changing. The first kind of message, usually referred to as 'hard news', tends to be the subject of most books about the practice of journalism. The second kind of message, about people – the things they do, the things they buy and the way they behave towards one another – are usually dismissed rather derisively as 'soft news'. People who read 'soft news' are thought to be either dumb or female (or both) and the inclusion of more soft news in 'serious newspapers' and television programmes is often described as 'dumbing' down (Franklyn, 1997) or feminising.

For those who believe that journalism has fallen off its moral perch, the central complaint is always that newspapers are too taken up with 'unworthy' tittle-tattle about celebrities and tragic stories about 'victims' (Bird and Dardenne, 1988; Franklyn, 1997; Sparks and Dahlgren, 1992; Sparks and Tulloch, 2000) and that serious news (of governments and wars, political organisations and the economy) is so oversimplified that people cannot make proper use of it. The view seems to be that real news events, like green vegetables, should be digested because they are good for us, and that any attempt to make them palatable is likely to rob them of their value. Even some of those who take 'unworthy news' seriously do so only because they are concerned that these stories are doing 'ideological work' which is aimed at keeping the down-trodden in their place.

This debate isn't new. Simon Jenkins, quoted in the *Guardian* (Engels, 1996) said: 'there is always a golden age of journalism and it was always when the person discussing the subject came into journalism'. Indeed, the concern about the right way to communicate important information goes right back to Plato, who thought that using representations to demonstrate

ideas or psychological truths (*mimesis*) was dishonest and that more direct forms, in which the author *tells* the audience the story (*diegesis*), were purer and more truthful. The counter-view is that, since all information is always selected, there can be no pure and truthful form. In all cases, writers decide which questions to ask, and who they will speak to. They prioritise information that fits their own view of events. Those who find ways to 'show' rather than simply 'telling' their readers are merely trying to help them understand. As Wayne C. Booth (1961) suggests in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, all stories are told, *mimesis* is just an illusion created by the story-teller.

If there is a difference between journalists today and journalists in that far-off golden age before we all 'dumbed down', it is not so much what we write about, but how we write it. There was a time when the well informed read more than one newspaper. Today the well informed read newspapers, periodicals, books, watch television, listen to the radio and, for instant news, they go online. With all that noise out there to compete with we have to work far harder than we have ever done before just to get a hearing. One way in which we do this is by creating an illusion of intimacy and involvement by using personal stories as metaphors and experiences as examples. Some writers, such as Colin Sparks (Sparks and Dahlgren, 1992: 41), see this as a problem:

They [the popular press] offer the experiences of the individual as the direct and unmediated key to the understanding of social totality. The simple reality is that the nature of the social totality is neither constituted through immediate individual experience nor entirely comprehensible in its terms. ... Critical thought must ... necessarily involve the processes of abstraction even if the critical impulse itself is ultimately grounded in immediate experience.

Sparks' promotion of abstract thought over personalisation comes up against what Bird and Dardenne (1988: 78) described as the journalist's paradox: 'The more "objective" they are the more unreadable they become; while the better storytellers they are, the more the readers will respond and the more they fear they are betraying their ideals.'

There are certainly journalists who continue to be plagued by this dilemma, but there is also a new generation of journalists who feel less of a conflict (Bird and Dardenne, 1988: 78). They recognise that we no longer live in a deferential world. Our readers don't want to be talked down to from a lofty height. They want us to talk in terms they understand. They are more likely to find out about a subject if we have caught their interest rather than gabbling away high above their heads. This doesn't mean that journalism has simply become another form of entertainment. We have only to see how newspaper readership rises in times of crisis to recognise that there is a

thirst for knowledge, and understanding, but readers also like to know what people are wearing and who they have fallen in love with.

Journalism is more than a means of bringing news about disasters and changes in government policy. It is also a critical weathervane for cultural change. Stories about celebrities may irritate but if we understand them as vehicles for cultural myths (Lule, 2001; Silverstone 1988), we can see that they play a part in both change and resistance. We play out our attitudes to race, gender, sexuality and so on through stories. The people our newspapers choose to feature may be celebrities but the stories they tell are age-old concerns about social norms and values. When a footballer's sexual exploits are splashed across the newspapers, they provide a vehicle for a discussion of social attitudes to fidelity. When the same sportsman is filmed doing a victory lap with his child on his shoulders, he is passing on a message about the changing role of fathers.

Kevin Kerrane and Ben Yagoda (1998: 13g), in their book *The Art of Fact*, define journalism as work that is 'animated by the central journalistic commitment to the truth', based on fact-gathering (not just working from memory or sensory observation) and timely. From this definition, they specifically exclude commentary and memoir. I agree that journalism must be based on evidence, but that evidence can also be drawn from our own memories and observations of our own emotions, as well as from the experiences, emotions and memories of others. It should be animated by the quest for truth, but tempered by an understanding of how difficult that quest can be. It should bring us news of how we feel as well as news of what is done in our name. This book is about writing about things that matter (and even those that don't matter much) so that they will be read.

PART I

THINKING ABOUT WRITING

LET'S HEAR IT FOR STORY-TELLERS

From narratives to stories

There is much debate about the exact definitions of narrative and story. Indeed, they are often used interchangeably. For the purposes of this book, then, story is a sequence of events in which some form of action takes place. In journalism, as opposed to fiction, that sequence of events has actually taken place or is likely to take place. A narrative, in the literary sense, would be the telling of that story in printed form. I use narrative in a broader way to describe a set of ideas (or discourses) constructed from the myths and legends that have shaped our cultures and communities, which then help us to construct the way we think about our world. I suggest that these 'meta-narratives' shape and also direct the way in which a story is presented. The narrative arc, or the narrative spine, refers to the foundation idea that runs through the story when it is presented.

Private stories

From infancy the job of any human being is to find out who they are through interaction with the people closest to them. They are told stories about who gave birth to them, who their families are, who to trust and who to fear. The information will be passed on via legends, folk tales and parables of heroes and bogey-men, martyrs and witches, fire and water.

Learning how to ... construct stories, understand stories, classify stories, check out stories, see through stories, and use stories to find out how things work or what they come to, is what the school, and beyond the school the whole 'culture of education' is ... all about. (Geertz, 2000: 193–4)

When we notice changes to the expected patterns of our lives we re-count these as stories, drawing humour, drama and suspense from the unexpected disruptions. These stories allow people to connect emotionally and feel closer but they also pass on information about changes or warn of danger. As we grow up, and our knowledge accumulates, we learn to sum up people

and situations quite quickly by keying into a range of signs and symbols that we then interpret according to our own preconceived ideas and the stories we have been told. These signs and symbols start to form an overarching narrative that helps us to interpret change, threat or danger.

We are all the unofficial biographers of ourselves for it is only by constructing a story, however loosely strung together, that we are able to form a sense of who we are and of what our futures might be. (Thompson, 1995: 210)

Collective narratives

Public stories have a similar function. They pass on important information, warn of danger and they also create a sense of connection. Through them we learn, for example, that crime will be punished and achievement will be celebrated. We mourn together when good people die and we celebrate when bad people are avenged. Journalists, novelists, dramatists all use the same basic material: they are describing what they have seen and heard and experienced. They all tell stories that arise from the culture in which they live, and in their turn contribute to a collective 'grand narrative' – a shared idea of cultural life.

To say that two people belong to the same culture is to say that they interpret the world in roughly the same ways and can express themselves, their thoughts and feelings about the world, in ways that will be understood by each other. Thus culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is happening around them, and 'making sense' of the world in broadly similar ways. (Hall, 1996: 2)

This shared idea is an expression of a particular ideology. In a liberal democracy, one of our shared ideas is that powerful people are fallible and subject to jointly agreed laws and standards. We tend to tell stories that fit in with this belief: stories of powerful people who have been found wanting and been reduced to our level. We also have a shared belief in the possibility of opportunity, so stories of people who have risen far above the place they were born into are also popular. These stories acquire the status of myth (Barthes, 1972: 119), contributing to our sense that power is not arbitrary and that individual success will be celebrated, as long as we don't abuse what privilege our society provides.

In societies in which the shared belief in social solidarity overrides the belief in individual freedom, we would expect to see lots of stories in which self-sacrifice is celebrated and selfishness is punished. For example, the central character of the Chinese soap opera *Yearning* was a poor and poorly educated woman. Her life is a series of trials but she was not redeemed at the last moment by the love of a wealthy man or a miraculous

cure (as we would expect of an American soap opera); rather, her self-sacrifice was celebrated as a worthy end in itself (Rofel, 1999). In Chinese newspapers, stories about corrupt officials are popular but, whereas in a western democracy the emphasis is likely to be on the failings of the individual, in China the emphasis will be on the success of the system in rooting out corruption.

These collective narratives help us not only to decode and evaluate stories, but also to decide which stories are important. On the whole, the stories we tell are normative – they point out and punish those who deviate from the norm and celebrate people and events that confirm our sense of how things ought to be. This is not something we do consciously; it is embedded into our thinking to such an extent that it requires an effort of will to conceive matters differently. This tendency to uphold the *status quo* has often been commented upon by critical scholars because it is used to block out discussion about change and to pillory those who do not conform. Indeed, it may be argued that this tendency to check everything, uncritically, against our pre-existing knowledge (Hall, 1996: 646) means that we have a built-in tendency to be suspicious of people and ideas that are unfamiliar and that this suspicion can be used to create division instead of cohesion.

Narrative and the conventions of journalism

Journalists are like novelists in that they are story-tellers, but they are unlike them in equally important ways. We are bound by a different set of imperatives. We tell people about events which are actually happening in the world at that time. If every journalist were to disappear tomorrow, society would re-invent us the day after, and in doing so would almost certainly suggest that news needs to be:

- timely – be about something that has just happened, or is happening, or has only just been discovered, or which will have resonance at this particular moment,
- relevant – have meaning for their existing audience,
- important – tell us about things that matter to that particular audience,
- focused on change to the established order – new songs, new trends, new laws, new wars,
- evidence-based – stories cannot be invented but must be based on accounts of things that really happened and can be verified, and finally news needs to
- have impact – big is more newsworthy than small, close is more important than far away, bad news sells better than good news.

Only by operating within these conventions can journalists expect to be trusted by their audiences – and trust is important. Without it, those who

own the newspapers, magazines and television stations have no product, that is nothing to sell that is different from advertising. It is the realisation of this bond with the audience that makes it possible for journalists to work within the commercial world and allows for the development of professional ethics – loose rules of conduct that set the boundaries of what is permissible. Where there are no rules governing journalism, or where journalists have lost trust, people start looking elsewhere for the information they need to govern their lives.

This collective agreement about the permissible boundaries doesn't stop newspapers being selective or biased in the way in which they present information. The imperatives of news conventions provide the driving force for story selection, but at an unconscious level journalists are also looking for stories that fit in with their own (or their employer's) idea (narrative) of how the world works, or examples of how it doesn't work but ought to work.

Things are newsworthy because they represent the changefulness, the unpredictability and the conflictful nature of the world. But such events cannot be allowed to remain in the limbo of the 'random' – they must be brought within the horizon of the 'meaningful'. In order to bring events 'within the realm of meanings' we refer unusual or unexpected events to the 'maps of meaning' which already form the basis of our cultural knowledge. Into which the world is already 'mapped'. (Hall, 1996: 646)

The job of making a story 'fit' is done by a process of selection and juxtaposition so that, as Paul Willis (1971) observed: 'Once an item of news has been selected for transmission to the public there is already bias, some selective principle, some value, quite apart from the way it is presented.'

Choosing stories

Some of that 'value' undoubtedly derives from the structures of power within which journalists operate. To begin with, most 'hard' news stories emanate from what are described as 'authoritative sources' – the government, the police, the courts and the business community. More often than not journalists present the views of whichever part of the establishment their newspaper tends to support. Where news decisions are not overtly political in character they will still be made on the basis of certain 'values'. If the newspaper they work for is socially conservative in its outlook, then stories will be selected to uphold a world view in which 'good' people are married before they have children, refrain from sexually promiscuous behaviour, are unlikely to be homosexual and are always prudent in their financial affairs. A more liberal newspaper might select stories that demonstrate the validity of relationships that are not sanctified by state or religion and highlight the needs of people who are socially excluded.

But these power structures cannot on their own account for the kinds of story that continually recur in the pages of newspapers and magazines. Very often an item is chosen for what I would call its 'narrative quality' and that quality may well take precedence over the importance of the information contained in it, the source from which it derives or even the political slant of the newspaper. Bird and Dardenne (1988) suggest that we could productively look at news in terms of myth or archetype. It is through myth, they suggest, that members of a culture learn values and definitions of right and wrong. By understanding news as a means of conveying the values of society rather than merely a means of conveying information, we can understand more easily what journalists actually mean when they say 'now that's a great story'.

Often those stories have a very simple story line that depends on a reversal of our expectations. Today I heard about a woman who had won the lottery but hadn't told her family. Her behaviour is unexpected but only because of our preconceptions: the story in our heads. Those preconceptions and our realisation that she is outside the norm arouse our curiosity. We want to know why she did that but we are already judging her within the narrative of our own morality. We may see it as a gesture of independence or as shamefully selfish. The way in which the story is written need not tell us explicitly what the journalist (or newspaper) thinks. Judgement will usually be subtly implied by the way in which the story is told (the narrative approach). For example, one newspaper will chose to interview a family therapist about the likely impact of such behaviour on future family relationships. Another might choose to get a comment from an organisation championing women's financial independence. Each narrative approach invites the readers to view the story in a different light (the preferred code [Hall, 1996: 58]) but the readers will finally shape the narrative for themselves, and make their own judgements in the light of the narratives in their own heads.

E X E R C I S E

Narrative framing

Using internet archives, look at articles printed on the same day in three different newspapers on the subject of: teenage pregnancy, gay marriage, education reform. Print them out and, using a marker pen, highlight all the quotes and pieces of information that are the same. Now look at sources of additional information and comment. List them for each piece. Look at the ordering of the information. Which sources are given pride of place? Who gets the last word? How does the choice of additional comment affect the 'narrative framing'? From this, can you deduce the kind of audience that the writer had in mind?

The stories in our heads

In a conventional narrative, a protagonist endures a series of disruptions that test his strength and character, followed in the end by resolution. Aristotle (1998) believed that a story must be resolved in order for it to work. Tzvetan Todorov (1977) argued that stories end when an 'equilibrium' has been established. Robert McKee (1999) writes that 'archetypal' stories always end in closure (though he describes different forms of story that end with only partial closure), and all the story types described by Christopher Booker (2004) have clear resolutions.

News stories are also about disruption and change and they often focus on people who have endured testing experiences, but they don't always have resolutions and, even for feature stories, the resolutions are provisional. They are being told while events are unfolding. Where they work towards resolution they may be overturned by a new set of events tomorrow. Nevertheless, I would suggest, it is possible to read news and feature stories within these conventions as episodes in an ongoing drama. In the real world we never know how events will unfold but we are continually trying to guess. In a sense, the whole purpose of news is to provide us with readings of the present that will allow us to make predictions of the future. In making our predictions we are using a ready-made set of possibilities (narrative structures). It is in this impulse towards controlling our world and making it seem predictable that we use stories. Journalists, who share the same human desire to make sense of things, are using the same stories when they try to explain what has happened, and what might happen as a result. These narratives in our heads provide the impetus behind story structures and often the reason for choosing them. Sometimes events unfold neatly, mapped on to our expectations of story shape. Sometimes readers are lulled into the anticipation that a story will turn out a certain way, and then they are jerked awake when the writer (or life) pulls the archetypal rug out from under them, disturbing their expectations. Even if there is no obvious ending or resolution to a story, the expected, or desired, resolution is often implied in the way in which it is written.

Story archetypes

Journalists draw on the same set of basic characters, archetypes or myths, that are used by film-makers and novelists. They are the basic moral tales that guide human behaviour in all societies. They are told and retold in ways that conform to the needs and the norms of the particular society in which they are being written, and they are adapted as societal norms change. Some scholars and practitioners argue that there are a limited number of archetypal stories that recur throughout history and across cultures. Philip Parker (1999), a screenwriter, suggests eight. Christopher Booker

suggests that there are seven. Their lists are very similar and deal with: justice (revenge), pursuit of love, tragedy, triumph of the spirit, coming of age, the quest. Lule (2001) suggests seven 'master myths': the victim, the scapegoat, the hero, the good mother, the trickster, the other world and the flood. (Though this seems to mix up archetypal characters and plots.)

I have boiled these lists down to five basic narratives. Using these narratives, I will demonstrate how they are used to shape stories by selection and exclusion. It is useful to be aware that the chosen template can overwhelm, or completely change the emphasis and interpretation of the information rather than simply framing it. It is equally important to see how much stronger a story becomes when there is a clear narrative idea framing it and giving it a coherence and drive. We will look for these narratives as we analyse the features in the second section of the book.

1 Overcoming evil

Many stories are told to reassure ourselves that good will prevail over evil. Good may be a matter of morality but morality and self-interest (individually or collectively) are often entwined. Evil in these tales may be represented metaphorically (serpents, storms, giants) or embodied by people who must be prevented by the hero(es) from invading the body of the nation and stealing its food, jobs, women, children ... or sports trophies (think of the films *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Men in Black*, *Superman*). At the end of the story the kingdom has been saved. However, the very nature of live news means that we don't always know how the story will end. We don't know whether evil will be overcome. We just write as though evil should be overcome and evil, in some newspapers, is just about anything that isn't clearly and identifiably 'us'.

While the nature of this myth is to reassure and rally people against the fear of the unknown, it can also be used very negatively to isolate and repel strangers or things we don't understand. Very often the 'evil' is actually a 'scapegoat' (Lule, 2001: 60). In Nazi Germany in the 1930s and in Rwanda in the late 1990s the state, working hand-in-hand with the media, cast a minority group (the Jews and the Tutsi) as evil monsters, ascribing to them everything that their societies most abhorred and setting them up to be massacred. George Packer, in his article on the Ivory Coast (see George Packer, pages 109–30) describes how a powerful elite uses 'malevolent stranger' stories to drive a wedge between communities and consolidate their own power.

The myth of the evil, invading stranger is a recurring theme in parts of the British press. In the mid-1980s one British newspaper summed up a demonstration by black people under the headline 'The Black Tide meets the Thin Blue Line', setting up an opposition between black people and the police and throwing in the additional allusion to the story of David and

Goliath. In this case, the police (the thin blue line) were established as the 'plucky heroes' – an interesting reversal as the police actually represent the power of the state. Through the 1990s and 2000s the newspapers have turned their attention to 'asylum seekers', who have been characterised as the evil invaders. A *Daily Express* front page (27 July 2005) is typical: 'Bombers Are All Sponging Asylum Seekers', thus managing to construct all asylum seekers, not as people seeking refuge from violence, but as representing violence.

However, globalisation is creating the need for a new way of expressing the concept of evil invader. An examination of news coverage in the aftermath of the 9/11 attack in America, and the July 2005 Tube and bus bombings in London, demonstrated a new version of the old theme. The old secure boundaries of 'us' and 'them', based on class and race, could no longer serve in a world in which the victims were of all nations, bound together in the face of a common threat. Newspapers struggled to find a new formulation, a way of being able to use the story form of the invading force and the heroic nation, while at the same time redrawing the boundaries. The choice of photographs, and stories of victims, seemed designed to represent a bigger, multicultural 'us', which would, by contrast, diminish and marginalise 'them'. The problem was just how to describe 'them'. Newspapers slid around, describing the bombers as Islamic while at the same time going out of their way to reassure readers that Muslims, as a group, were not to be feared. As a way of demonstrating this, most newspapers in the UK chose to feature the picture of a young Muslim woman – the first victim of the tube bombers to be buried. She was clearly one of 'us', not 'one of them'. But this, broader, more inclusive view, does not fit easily on to existing *mind* maps. The more common stereotype of Islamic people as 'violent irrational terrorists always on the lookout for murder and bombing outrages' (Said, 1994: 23) tended to recur – a recognisable stereotype to fit into an easily recognisable story. Of all the narrative forms, this tends to be the easiest to manipulate to a particular point of view because it relies for its effect on the creation of a shallow stereotype. We never really get to know the evil monster. If we did, we might find ourselves sympathising with it. And then it would turn into a quite different story, such as one of those described below.

E X E R C I S E

Examine the news coverage of a recent natural disaster over a period of a week. Who or what is the evil? How is it overcome? Who are the heroes? The villains? Note whether the roles change as the story unfolds.