

It all begins with an Idea.
Finding that one angle will help guide reporters
through the journey to the final story.

Step #1: Idea

The first step in the writing process is a most critical one

Daisy had a dilemma.

“OMG – I have the front page story for Monday’s paper.”

“That’s great, Dais,” Elijah said.

“I have no idea on how or where to even start.”

“Oh, that stinks, Dais.”

Elijah always tried to be a supportive friend.

* * *

Instead of shared dismay, what Daisy and other beginning media writers need is a strategy, a plan of attack to tackle any story. The Six-Step Writing Process will help outline the work needed, leading to that final news story, and the order in which to proceed.

So write these steps down - perhaps even tattoo them to your inner arm – right above the flowering vine (ring of barbed wire), interspersed with hearts and butterflies (your initials in Japanese letters) tattooed to your left wrist.

The Six-Step Writing Process

1. **Idea** - Narrowing down the topic to one angle or focus.
2. **Research** - Learning more details and background about the Idea.
3. **Report** - Drafting a list of questions and conducting interviews.
4. **Organize** - Outlining information and quotations into story form.
5. **Write** - Using knowledge of leads, transitions, grammar, AP Style.
6. **Revise** - Following the editing process and feedback, the story is rewritten into final form and ready to be published.



Photo by Terry Nelson

Writing all starts with a great angle. Let your creative juices flow. Try brainstorming.

TEAM WORK

One way to write a great story is to use a technique called “Brainstorming.”

Brainstorming is simple and fun: gather up some classmates or staff members and take a story topic, making a list of everything that comes to mind to find a fresh approach.

For example, let’s say you’ve been assigned a story over the upcoming play production. A boring, predictable approach might be to summarize the play, list main actors, get a quote from one of them and the director, and end with the dates, times and costs of admission at the end.

Ho-Hum.

Maybe there’s been a recasting or backstage challenge - or perhaps all of the costumes have been created from sheets.

Maybe the recent blizzard made it difficult for theatre students to get in to build the sets or rehearse, so the stage manager used his snow mobile to pick up the actors one, by one and carry them in...

We’re looking for a fresh story angle here, and more brains are better than one.

Try story MAPPING

Quickly write down all the ideas and related thoughts that emerge on a topic.

Don't stop to judge. Do not discuss them yet.

Don't worry if the ideas seem silly. Don't cross out or ignore any idea.

Don't worry about spelling or punctuation or filling in details.

Once the flow of ideas has dried up, review them, throw out some; keep others.

Evaluate and Expand.

You now have your narrowed topic, idea or angle and you are ready to begin your story process.

In brainstorming, someone acts as secretary and writes down all of the ideas thrown out on the board or a piece of paper. Ideas are then crossed out on the list, making the exercise a linear process.

Mapping and Branching

are two other techniques that accommodate a non-linear way of thinking.

In mapping or branching, instead of making a list of related ideas about a story idea, put the topic or subject in the center of a page.

When you get an idea, draw a line out from the center and write the idea at the end.

If that idea triggers a new one, draw a line from that word, or return to the center and draw additional new lines for each idea.

You can try this exercise using the branches of a tree. See page 32 for an example.

A second style map is illustrated on page 44. Experiment with the different devices to see what works best with your own creative style of thinking.

Step one: IDEA

Daisy's assignment – a universal one for discussion's sake – Homecoming - is not an idea but a broad story topic. No wonder she's paralyzed. Will she cover the game, the halftime, the royalty, the dance, the parade, the spirit activities, the alumni, the fans, the cheerleaders, etc. etc. etc. (said as the King of Siam in the Broadway musical, *The King and I*).

Just as Homecoming is too broad of a topic and needs to be reduced to a more specific idea, so are assignments like "Play Production," "Track Meet," "Living Off Campus," and the "Start of School."

Daisy, as with other reporters, needs a strategy to help narrow down the topic to a single angle or idea that will relay the most important information to the readers. Focusing on a single element will allow her to fully cover the angle, instead of writing a broad, lifeless overview of the original topic.

One such plan is to brainstorm or map the topic "Homecoming" by spinning out all sorts of different angles possible in coverage. This is where classmate Elijah and others can be of great help. A small group can "brainstorm" where ideas are randomly and freely thrown out without fear of ridicule, since different individuals with different perspectives can help broaden story idea choices.

It's important in these idea-generating activities that no one criticize or laugh at any suggestion, since that would inhibit the free flow of ideas. Often times it's easier to put down others' ideas than it is to come up with your own. Ground rules should be discussed and agreed upon before a brainstorming or story mapping/branching session begins.

Let's say the reporter and colleagues come up with 30 different ideas. First the most unrealistic ideas fall off the list. Perhaps we're now down to 8 different angles and ideas that have spun off the original topic, "Homecoming." The next step is to take your knowledge of "News" and the values of human interest, prominence, impact, etc. from Week 3 and apply them to help narrow down your choices to one single idea.

Idea #1: You could cover the game. You know your school has won the homecoming football game for the past nine years. You also know that the opponent this year is a school you have not defeated in recent years. The game is going to be a tough one. There is a lot of hype. Your leading wide receiver is out of this game with a torn ACL. Their quarterback is sidelined because of poor grades. The winner of this game will hold the number one spot in your conference. There is much at stake. Hmm, who might you talk to down the road? The coach, the sidelined players, their parents, the athletic trainer, the back-up quarterback, the coach of the opposing team? It's a strong possibility.

The news elements or values of timeliness, conflict, human interest and proximity come into play with this story, possessing four of the six news values. As you may recall, the more the elements, the bigger the story.

Idea #2: You shift your focus to a second angle suggested in the brainstorming session: The homecoming dance. You know the dance is held every year. About 200 couples usually attend. The DJ is local and one of your graduates. It is always held in the ballroom of a local hotel. You know the group worked really hard on the decorations, which will reflect the theme of homecoming.

The news elements in this second idea are timeliness, proximity and human interest, but there's not much new information here – unless something unexpected happens at the dance. You move on.

Idea #3: The alumni from 25 years ago and 50 years ago are usually honored at the halftime of the game and featured on floats in the parade before the game. This year, one of the alumni from a class being featured is a retired astronaut who worked with the Discovery Space Shuttle that took veteran astronaut John Glenn back into space in 1998. This graduate will also serve as the Parade Marshall, and deliver a talk at the alumni center on Friday.

Hmm... some prominence here. Maybe this is the angle you should adopt.

Similarly you review other ideas that take you from the coverage of the Homecoming King and Queen crowning and the halftime performance of the Marching 100, to the sale of spirit wear and concessions available at the game, with proceeds going toward the new stadium construction earmarked for completion in 2021. Each angle has its own set of news values that makes each a possible choice.

Now the reporter has to consider the readers. What do they need to know or what would be interesting to know about?

Let's say Daisy decides to focus on the game and the conditions of the players' health, field and weather influences, the history of match-ups and the significance of the win or loss. Some of the other "ideas" could become secondary coverage and sidebars, part of a graphic or information in a caption under a photograph. They might be delegated to a list of highlights or deleted altogether.

So Step one: Idea – is complete. As a reporter you have brainstormed, broken down and mapped out the different angles of the bigger topic. You have considered the news values present in each angle. You have made your final decision on which angle has the most new information or "news" and which would be the most important or interesting for your audience to know.

You are now ready to move on to Step #2.

Step two: RESEARCH.

Research. A pretty lofty-sounding word and surely not necessary for a simple news story – right? You know the answer.

Without research, the reporter knows no more about the idea she has chosen to write about than the regular, non-journalist sitting next to her in the library.

Some more IDEAS

Phone books + Dictionaries

You can find story ideas anywhere if you're open to them. Ellen Barry of The Boston Globe has found inspiration in the yellow pages.

"I must have been stuck on the B's because I did baby models and bronze baby shoe salesmen and baby modeling agencies..." Barry said in Best Newspaper Writing 2002.

- Skip Scanlon,
Poynter Institute

Idea File

Keep a notebook by your bedside. When you get an inspiration, write down story ideas - even in the middle of the night.

When you observe something unusual or hear a story someone tells that catches your interest, write it down in a notebook you carry with you so you won't forget to check it out later.

Sitting at train tracks every morning at 7:45? Wonder why the train passes through a busy intersection at this time every morning with so many jobs beginning at 8? Jot it down. Could be a good story.

Look through newspapers, magazines, Pinterest, online sites. See a good story idea or get an inspiration for other coverage? Stick that in your Idea File.

Localize

Find a local citizen/student angle to a story with state, national or global significance. Connections can be made in the most unusual ways with people you least suspect.

The Little Sister

Haley Wilson started her freshman year only a few months after the murder of her older sister, Hannah Wilson. Haley wants to be strong. But when you're only 18 and your world has cracked open, how do you know what strong is?

Most freshmen, at the start of their first semester, wonder how they're going to make it on their own.

At IU, freshmen are given pointers on how to wash bright colored clothes in cold and make it to class on time.

But there's no handbook for what Haley Wilson is going through. Last spring, during Little 500 weekend, her sister's murder consumed the campus.

Hannah, a 22-year-old senior, went missing in the early hours of April 24 after her friends had put her in a cab home from a bar.

The next morning, her body was discovered in a grassy clearing in Brown County.

Police arrested Daniel Messel, a 49-year-old Bloomington man,

after they reported finding his cell phone next to the body and Hannah's blood and hair inside his car.

Charged with first-degree murder, Messel is in jail and is scheduled to go to trial this summer.

An introvert all her life, Haley is starting college in the shadow of a high-profile case.

She said she wants her fellow students to remember Hannah's murder, but she doesn't want them to walk across campus in fear.

She shies from the extra attention that comes with being Hannah's sister.

But when students make dead girl jokes in front of her, not knowing who she is, she fights the urge to call them out.



Photo by Emma Harrison

The above excerpt is from the **Indiana Daily Student** newspaper archives of **Indiana University, Bloomington, Ind.** The project is based on five months of reporting, and was published in the fall of 2015. The reporters attended Haley's classes, rode her bus, hung out in her dorm room and watched her cheer. The story is also based on interviews with Haley, her family and friends and court documents.

* * *

Lead reporter **Hannah Alani** is currently serving in the **Indiana Daily Student** staff as **Investigations Editor and Court reporter**. She just completed a summer **Hearst** internship as a staff writer intern at the **Tampa Bay Times**, Florida's largest newspaper. She has also served an internship as a reporter on the **English Language Gazette** in London.

Advice from one journalist: 'This kind of work matters'

By Hannah Alani
Communications major
Indiana University

I'll get right to the point for all communications majors: If you don't actively participate in student media, you are wasting your degree.

The student-run newsroom is the best classroom on campus. Classes will introduce you to writing and reporting skills and give you an overview of hypothetical ethical situations.

Participating in student media forces you to actually go out and start reporting on the world. You'll find yourself actually making difficult ethical decisions.

On that note... Once you're in the door with your student media newsroom, remember

that journalism is all for nothing if we're not writing stories that matter.

Get out of the newsroom and physically enter the worlds of the people you report on.

For example, covering a murder. You could just sit in your office and get every piece of information you need for the news brief by calling up the cops.

Or you could go to the murder scene to get the police quotes, and then stick around and talk to everyone else.

Who found the body? What was that person doing when they found it? How has it affected them? Are there any homicide survivors present?

Get their accounts. Where is the family? How did they find out what happened? That's the

difference between reporting news and writing a story that matters.

Work hard. Find the people who are most affected. Interview friends and family of the suspected murderer. Extend your empathy and compassion, and share the story that matters.

"I made that sound a lot easier than it actually is. It's really, really hard to drive to a murder scene and approach a grieving mother and ask, "So how do you feel?"

A few people will just say, "I don't want to talk." But you'll be surprised by how many people open up.

I've often found that if you're compassionate and genuine - they'll share.

A few times sources have told me that talking to me was actual-

ly therapeutic for them.

Almost always, after a story has run, sources thank me for caring enough to get their side of the story.

That is always humbling, because I feel that their job in being the person who experiences the tragedy is much harder than my job of documenting their grief.

Always approach sources with humility, empathy and genuine interest.

They share a piece of their lives, set against the backdrop of an incredibly painful time, and allow that information to flow through me onto paper to be shared with the world.

That is truly humbling. This kind of work really matters.

Practice Assignments

Try the following exercises to reinforce the messages of Week 4.

IDEA: Assignment #1

Localize and Personalize: Looking for Connections

Using the Internet, scroll through different national and international news sites and see what is “In the News” today. Find two story topics that could be of value and importance to your community or school. Story inspirations can come from anywhere.

1. How could you localize the content so it would affect or interest your student body or town? What connection might you find?
2. What type of person could you look for who might have a connection to the broader news?

Every story should have a “news peg” or a timely reason for running it locally.

Examples:

- 6/21/2016 “Another frozen veggies recall due to Listeria concerns” CNN.com

Localize: Frozen mixed vegetables and peas packaged by Bountiful Harvest, First Street, Great Value, Live Smart, Market Pantry and Sprouts between the dates of Sept. 2 and June 2 are included in the recall. Those brands are also carried in your local Target and Walmart stores in your home town.

Personalize: Reporter could call local stores and see what they did with these brands of veggies. Do they have a policy on how they dispose of them or do they refund money to those who purchased the frozen vegetables from these dates? You read on and find out that Listeria primarily affects the elderly, children, pregnant women and those who suffer from autoimmune disease. You could call local doctors or nurses and find out if Listeria has ever been a concern and what people should do if they eat tainted vegetables.

- 6/21/2016 “Gold-medal winner mugged in Rio” USA Today.com

Localize: This Olympian claimed he was mugged at gunpoint at an out-of-town event. The story is about security. Does your school or town have a problem with similar crime? What is the current police presence at larger events? Are there areas of the city or campus where residents should take extra caution? What should a victim of a mugging do?

Personalize: Can you find someone who has been mugged and get their story? What advice would they give to others in a similar situation? Do student groups travel out of state or country? What precautions are taken so they are not involved in a similar situation in a different country? Interview the police and overseas trip organizers. How should travelers respond before, during and after they may be in an unsafe situation?

Now, it's YOUR TURN

Find the inspiration for a news story coverage from national or international news today.

Date of Story	Headline of Story	Source/News Site
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1. _____

LOCALIZE _____

PERSONALIZE _____

2. _____

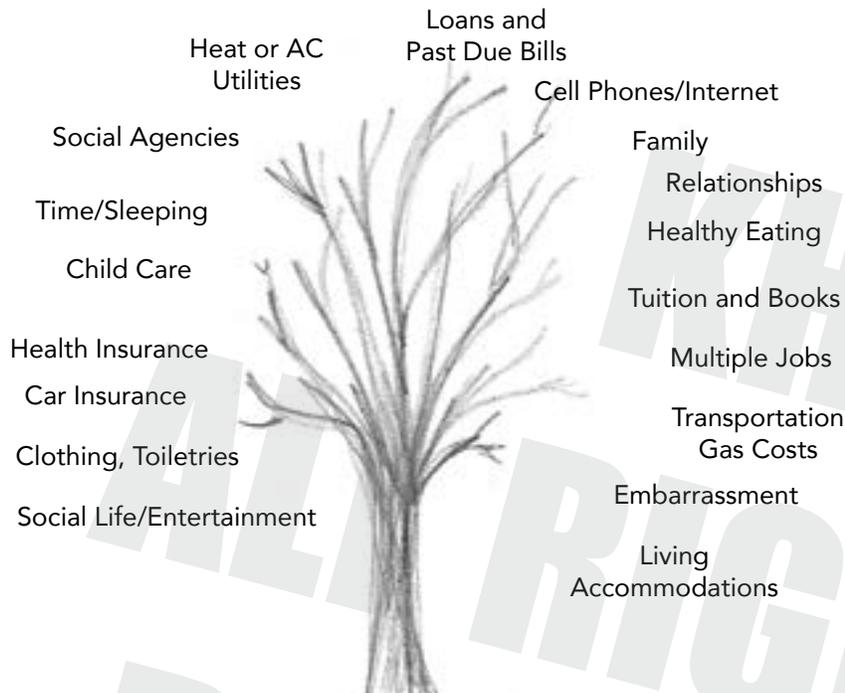
LOCALIZE _____

PERSONALIZE _____

Still More Practice

Assignment #2

Story Branching & Mapping



EMANCIPATED STUDENTS
HOW TO SURVIVE ON YOUR OWN IN COLLEGE

Graphic by Terry Nelson

Search for angles to narrow down your story topic to an idea. Practice, using the following broad topics:

1. Graduation
2. Social Media Use
3. Basketball Season
4. Better Health
5. Greek Life



BROAD STORY TOPIC

Assignment #3

Brainstorming

Divide your students into groups of 3-5 and give the groups one of the problems below to solve. Each group should come up with some great ideas to share with the rest of the class.

Time limit: 5 minutes per topic

1. I have \$100, and I would like to go away to college with a wardrobe of 10 cool outfits. What should I buy? (don't worry about shoes + coats)

2. I'm tired of the prejudice against the different races at our school. Here's three ideas that we could use to bring us together.

3. Our school administration wants us to decide upon a new mascot and name that fits our school. Suggest one and be prepared to explain why and how it fits the school.

4. My roommate and I do not get along on any level. We've been avoiding each other, but the bottom line is we have to figure out a way to get along. Give three ways to help this happen.

Summary

What Did You Learn in Week 4?

The important point of this section that I hope you "get" is that the writing process starts with one great idea.

1. When looking for story ideas, the world has no boundaries. No one wants to read your analysis of the elections - the established media has more experience, access and resources to do a far better job. But you can take what is in the news and make it fit your audience by finding a local angle and personalize it by telling the story of "a man" connected with the story.

2. Two brains are better than one. When trying to find the idea or angle for your story, invite others to help you brainstorm ideas or map out a topic to find a specific angle. No idea is too crazy - some of the best stories come out of silly suggestions.

3. Finally every story should have a "news peg" or a timely reason for running the article now, as opposed to later.

GET THE IDEA...?