

The writer must mold a story's theme as it emerges from the reporting, much as a sculptor shapes a statue from a block of marble



Chiseled writing

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1. Every investigative story or series has a theme. The essence of that theme is the lede or nut graph of that story.
2. The story theme emerges in the reporting process, much like a statue emerges from a block of stone as the sculptor works. The reporter must recognize and develop that theme while reporting the story.
3. The lede or nut graph follows naturally from the theme. Once the theme has been established, seek the most substantial facts, best quotes and most illustrative anecdotes to flesh out the theme and back up the lede.
4. Even at this stage, you should be framing the lede in your imagination. Soft or hard? If soft, anecdotal, scene-setter, zinger, tease, etc.? If soft, do you have the best available anecdote, scene, etc., to showcase the theme and get readers into the story?
5. Find a quiet place to write.
6. Organize your notes. Study them. Are there enough facts to justify the theme and back the lede? Do you have good quotes, anecdotes, etc.? Are there any important sub-themes? Do you have enough information to prove them? How should they be handled in this story?
7. If the story involves many different dates, prepare a chronology as both a reporting and writing aid.
8. Do a story outline. One story, or a series? Length? Sidebars? What are the sidebars about? How many?
9. Review your notes against the outline. Will it work?
10. Select your best facts, quotes, anecdotes, etc. Decide on the minimum amount of each that will be needed to clearly and conclusively prove your story theme. Put away the balance of your notes in a place where you won't be tempted to use them.
11. If you choose a soft, delayed lede, remember not to delay too long, use only a scene-setter or anecdote that exactly illustrates the theme, and plot a smooth transition from the particular to the general.
12. If you are going to use bullets or showcase sub-themes toward the top of the story, remember that you must come back to these bullets or sub-themes and flesh them out further down in the body of the story.
13. Decide whether the body of the story should best be told in chronological order or facts of descending importance. Remember, the reader must have some sort of roadmap to get through a long story.
14. Organize your notes in the order in which you will write the story.
15. Craft your lede.
16. Write.
17. Get an editor, lawyer, teacher, colleague, to go through your story line-by-line, challenging your structure, your proof, and the way in which you phrase and present it.
18. Rewrite.
19. Repeat Step 17.
20. Smooth it out.