

The hourglass: serving the news, serving the reader

June 18, 2003 [Chip Scanlan](#)

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Every trade has its secrets, every job has its tools: the carpenter's hammer and saw, the plumber's wrench, the painter's palette and brushes. In Shakespeare's time, actors used to carry bags that contained the tools of their art: makeup, costumes, props that enabled them to switch in and out of character as the drama on stage demanded.

As a handyman, my motto has always been, "Give me a tool and I'll break something." But as a writer, I'm always searching for the tools that will help me create the magic that is good writing, whether it's a breaking news story, magazine article, personal essay, or fiction.

The hourglass structure is one such device. A story shape that journalists can employ when they have news to report and a story to tell. Earlier this week, I listened to [Christine Martin](#), dean of West Virginia's Perley Isaac Reed School of Journalism, describe the form to Poynter's summer fellows as a useful tool for reporters searching for a form.

"It's important," Martin observed, "for a reader to be cradled in a structure." It's an apt metaphor since a cradle is a framework used to support something.

Stories need a support, shape, a structure, in the same way a building needs a frame and our bodies a skeleton. Ernest Hemingway, a one-time reporter who became one of America's most influential novelists, had this in mind when he said, "Prose is architecture, not interior decoration." Effective writers understand this and make sure their toolbox contains a variety of story shapes.

The best stories often create their own shape; writers consider their material, determine what they want the story to say, and then decide on the best way to say it.

Architects and writers follow the same rule: Form follows content. That means before you design a container you determine what you need to put inside. You wouldn't try to ship an elephant in a shoebox.

But journalists, like all writers, sometimes rely on tried-and-true forms and formulas: the inverted pyramid, [the "five boxes" approach](#), [the nut graf story](#). You need to be familiar with these forms whether or not you decide to write your story in a completely new way.

"Formulaic writing has gotten a bad name," says Poynter Online Editor Bill Mitchell, a veteran reporter and editor. "Done right, it diverts creatively from formula in ways that serve the needs

of the story at hand. Tying the reporting, as well as the writing, to the form lends a discipline and focus that produce better stories.”

The hourglass was named by my colleague Roy Peter Clark in 1983 after he had begun to notice something new in his morning paper.

It wasn't the news; it was the way the news was being told. In their stories, reporters seemed to be combining two forms: the inverted pyramid and the narrative.

Clark was a likely discoverer. A college English literature professor-turned-newspaper writing coach and reporter, he used his skills as a literary scholar and his experience in the newsroom to deconstruct the form.

In an article published in the *Washington Journalism Review* (since renamed *American Journalism Review*), he described this form and gave it a distinctive name: the hourglass. It provided an alternative, Clark said, “that respects traditional news values, considers the needs of the reader, takes advantage of narrative, and spurs the writer to new levels of reporting.”

Clark said the hourglass story can be divided into three parts:

THE TOP. Here you deliver the news in a summary lead, followed by three or four paragraphs that answer the reader's most pressing questions. In the top you give the basic news, enough to satisfy a time-pressed reader. You report the story in its most concise form. If all that is read is the top, the reader is still informed. Because it's limited to four to six paragraphs, the top of the story should contain only the most significant information.

THE TURN. Here you signal the reader that a narrative, usually chronological, is beginning. Usually, the turn is a transitional phrase that contains attribution for the narrative that follows: according to police, eyewitnesses described the event this way, the shooting unfolded this way, law enforcement sources and neighbors agree.

THE NARRATIVE. The story has three elements: a beginning, middle and end. The bottom allows the writer to tell a chronological narrative complete with detail, dialogue, and background information.

The hourglass form summarizes the news, then shifts to a narrative. The top delivers the news, the turn acts as a transition, the narrative tells the story.

The hourglass can be used in all kinds of stories: crime, business, government, even to report meetings. It's best suited, however, for dramatic stories that can be told in chronological fashion. In the right hands, as the following story from *The Miami Herald* illustrates, the hourglass is a virtuoso form that provides the news-conscious discipline of the inverted pyramid and the storytelling qualities of the classic narrative.

BEHIND THE HOURGLASS

1. THE TOP

Shots Fired While He Stabbed Ex-Wife

By Conie Piloto and Molly Hennessy-Fiske
The Miami Herald
Aug. 9, 1998

It wasn't the first time that Dennis Leach had violently terrorized his ex-wife. But it will be the last.

Leach, 37, was shot by Davie police Saturday afternoon after he disregarded their orders to drop his knife and instead plunged it repeatedly into Joyce Leach outside her duplex at 6110 SW 41st Ct.

Dennis Leach was pronounced dead at the scene. His ex-wife, who asked police, "Why did you shoot him?" as she was loaded into the ambulance, was taken to Memorial Regional Hospital in Hollywood, where she was listed in stable condition.

The mayhem was witnessed by Dennis Leach's parents and some neighbors. The neighbors said turmoil at the Leach home was nothing new.

In May, Dennis Leach was charged with aggravated assault when, according to police, he showed up with a hammer, broke a window and chased his ex-wife around the duplex, shouting, "I'm going to kill you!"

In the first five paragraphs, the story conveys all the information the time-pressed reader needs to know: Police shoot to death a man who refuses their commands to drop his knife and stabs his ex-wife instead. The top answers several of the five W's: who, what, where, when, why, as well as how. A special feature of this lead is the first paragraph, which departs from the usual summary lead: Police shot and killed a 37-year-old Davie man after he disregarded their orders to drop his knife. Instead the writer draws in the reader with an indirect approach that sums up the situation with chilling finality.

2. THE TURN

Police and neighbors gave this account of the latest domestic violence:

The transition is short, alerting the reader that the news report is shifting to storytelling form and indicating the sources for the chronicle to come.

3. THE NARRATIVE

Dennis Leach became angry with his 37-year-old ex-wife after he went to a neighborhood bar Friday night. He stormed into her duplex Saturday afternoon and threatened her with a butcher knife.

A terrified Joyce Leach dashed next door to the adjoining home of Leach's parents.

"He's got a knife, and he's gonna kill me!" Leach's mother, Reba Leach, said her daughter-in-law screamed.

At the same time, 15-year-old April Leach, one of their six children, called from a convenience store blocks away.

"Your father is going to kill me!" Joyce Leach yelled.

April Leach hung up and dialed 911.

When officers arrived at the duplex, Dennis Leach was chasing his ex-wife with a knife.

Police ordered him to drop the weapon, said Davie Capt. John George.

Instead, Leach started stabbing her.

An officer fired at Dennis Leach, striking him around a knee, but he wouldn't stop plunging the knife into his ex-wife, neighbors said.

An officer or officers fired again, this time hitting Leach in the chest. He collapsed and died on the side of the road. His parents were watching from inside their home.

Davie police would not say whether more than one officer fired at Dennis Leach, nor would they identify the officer or officers.

Neighbors say they heard at least five shots.

As police carried Joyce Leach to an ambulance, the knife still stuck in her right shoulder, she turned to police and said: "Is he dead, is he dead. ... Why did you shoot him?" said next-door neighbor Shannon Schmitzer.

As Joyce was hoisted into the ambulance and police placed a yellow tarp over Dennis Leach's body, April Leach and a brother arrived.

The two siblings cried and tried to run to their mother and father but were escorted away.

Police later drove them to Memorial Regional Hospital to be with their mother.

Dennis and Joyce Leach lived for years in the duplex owned by Leach's parents.

"They've had a lot of trouble in the past," Schmitzer said.

As the couple's problems escalated, the Department of Children and Family Services stepped in. The state took custody of the children for a while, placing them in foster homes, neighbors said.

Joyce Leach got a job at Dunkin' Donuts, just blocks away, but Dennis Leach couldn't stay out of trouble.

In May, Davie police charged him with domestic violence and aggravated assault after the incident with the hammer. He was convicted and jailed for 90 days.

He got out Tuesday night and returned to his family's house, his mother said.

"We weren't supposed to let him stay here," his mother said. "But he just showed up."

The time had come to tell the story of what transpired the night Dennis Leach died. The writer tells the story chronologically, drawing together information gleaned from interviews with the sources identified in the turn. As with all stories, the narrative section has a beginning, a middle that describes the main action, and an end, with the climactic cry of the abused ex-wife, "Why did you shoot him?" The conclusion wraps up the story with background about the couple's troubles and then, like many good stories, ends on a note that echoes back to the beginning. Note how the writer uses dramatic quotations and vivid details, such as the yellow tarp that covers Dennis Leach's body, to show the narrative scene that the reader is merely told about in the top.

The hourglass is a form that satisfies editors who prefer a traditional approach to news writing as well as impatient readers who tire easily of leisurely approaches to stories that take forever to get to the point. Readers who want a more complete story, who like to see a story unfold as they read it, are happy as well. The hourglass serves readers' need for news and their natural desire for story.

Excerpted from [Reporting and Writing: Basics for the 21st Century](#) (Oxford University Press).