

What Is a Pyramid Doing, Standing on Its Point?



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A right-side-up pyramid has a broad base and tapers up to a point. A century or two ago most writing—storytelling, scientific writing, letters and journalism—was organized like this pyramid. It would start slowly at the pointed top of the pyramid with the setting, background, description, history and details. Near the end of the writing, the reader finally got to the broad part of the pyramid—the action, the conclusions, the exciting stuff, the most important news. This style assumed that people had such an appetite for news that they would sit down and read all the way to the end to get to the point.

Journalism in the 19th century turned that pyramid on its head, inverting it, with the most important stuff coming first, the details and background following afterward, and the least significant details coming at the end. The inverted pyramid, as it has been used for over a century and a half, works today because people are busy. It also works because people expect to pick and choose what they read, paying attention only to what interests them. (Very few people read every word of each edition of *The New York Times*.)

Inverted pyramid form is not used for every news story, but it is essential to breaking news. Its philosophy—start with the most interesting stuff, let

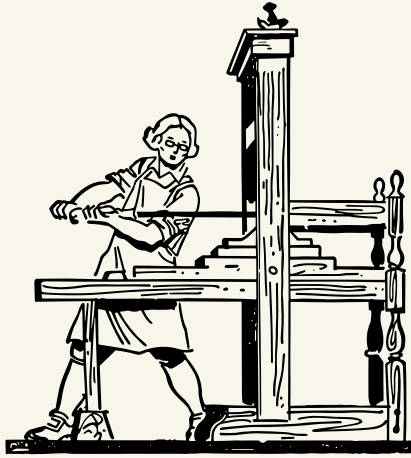
the reader decide, do not waste people's time—lies behind almost all journalistic writing, including columns, news, features and reviews, and almost all media used for news.

How Did the Pyramid Flip Over?

As has often happened in journalism, technology influenced writing. Several theories seek to explain the inverted pyramid. All are set around the time of the Civil War (1861–1865) in the United States, when the inverted pyramid first gained ground, and all involve technological innovation, especially

- steam presses
- telegraph

Fifty years before the Civil War, journalism was a slow business, with news traveling by horse or ship. Newspapers were printed on hand presses powered by strong men (Figure A on the next page). In 1816, even the most advanced presses in America, presses that used weights and counterweights to lessen the pressman's work, could print no more than 250 copies an hour. (The *London Times* across the ocean had a hand press that could do 1,100 copies in an hour.) Circulations in America therefore were small and publications relatively infrequent. Weekly newspapers were more common than daily papers.



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Figure A

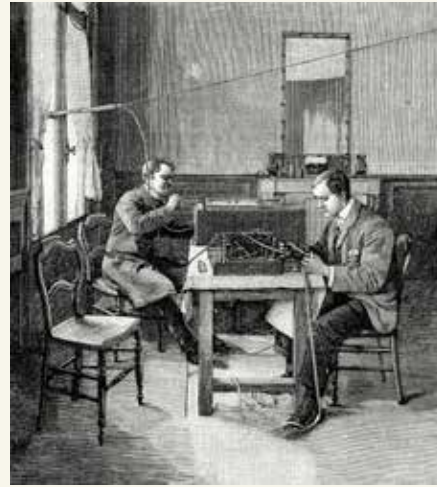
Steam Presses

By 1865, newspapers truly had become *mass media*. Steam-powered presses could print 12,000 copies an hour (later 30,000 an hour), running 5-mile-long rolls of newsprint paper between two cylinders. The New York Times, which was founded in 1851, printed on such presses and was one of six major daily papers in New York at the time of the Civil War. In all, 54 different papers published in NYC that year. Seventeen of them published daily. By the end of the War, there was simply more news available, and it came more often. Readers had more choices and fewer reasons to read to the end of slow-moving accounts.

The Telegraph

The telegraph changed how fast news was gathered and reported. Where telegraph cables connected cities, communications went not at the speed of a horse—the pony express could get a message from California to the telegraph office in Missouri in 10 days—but at the speed of electricity (Figure B). By 1861 telegraph cables connected the country from the Pacific to the Atlantic. In 1866 telegraph cables connected America with Europe.

Telegraph communication was fast, but it was also expensive. Sending 10 words cost \$1.55 in 1840, so many journalists learned to get right to the point, especially if six other correspondents were waiting for the same telegraph line. Though some Civil War journalists still wrote in the slow-moving right-side-up pyramid style, many others adopted the efficient inverted pyramid.



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Figure B

The News Hole

As news arrived more swiftly and papers published more frequently, journalists had more opportunities to break news that was truly fresh. If an editor knew that a story was coming from a reporter or from the telegraph, he could leave a *news hole*, literally an open space in the page he was laying out by hand, one metal letter at a time, into a wooden frame called a chase (Figure C).



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Figure C

1. If an editor left a 9-inch news hole for a breaking news story, nine inches was exactly what was available. It was an exact measure—nothing could be kerned, leaded or shifted to give him 10 inches. Clever endings and conclusions were wasted in this process. Everything after the ninth inch had to be expendable because it was going to be cut.
2. Reporters could overwrite by several inches, putting the least important stuff last, and the editor would simply cut off any copy he could not use.