

Think Like a Reader, Work with a Team

An alternate way to find a focus for some general news stories, as well as many feature stories, is called the Maestro Concept, lead by an editor or other staff leader. As you confer on your preliminary research, your editor may decide that your story could deserve team storytelling. Usually such a story is one that can be told through design, infographics and photography, in addition to writing. Your media may also allow you to use video or sound recordings and interactive features.

If your story is chosen for team storytelling, it will change the way the story is reported as well as how the story is told. It will also change how you find a focus for your story.

Many news staffs have a routine to produce stories, a routine that may produce routine stories. It goes something like this: The reporter confers with the editor, gathers information and writes the story. While the story is being revised and edited, someone starts searching for a photo or other visuals from among the event photos for a one that will “work” or sends out a photographer to “get a shot” or a videographer to get some footage. The story then moves to the page designer and perhaps to another graphic artist to design an infographic, and finally to the editor who will write captions, the headline and perhaps a deck or a readout. If your publication includes broadcast, the anchors’ lead-in comments and their closing “lead-out” comments are often written last.

Team Storytelling: The Maestro Concept

With team storytelling, the reporters’ work remains the keystone of the coverage, but other team members are involved from early in the reporting process, so that information that is best communicated with a photo and a caption will be told in the photo and caption, not in the sixth paragraph of your writing. The headline and subheads will carry information that might otherwise go into your five W’s lead. An infographic, such as a timeline, can replace six or seven paragraphs. Depending on the media in which you publish, you may be able to use a slide show of still shots, a video with sound, natural sound, and an infographic of links to other sites or include interactive features. You record footage from the scene as you report, or you may microblog to solicit audience response before the story is published.

This process is called the Maestro Concept and was created by Buck Ryan, then a professor at Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern, for print publications, but it works well across all media and works especially well for staffs that use two or more different media, such as broadcast and online, or online and in a print news magazine. The Maestro Concept brings together many ways to tell a story and uses the strengths of each to tell the story as clearly and swiftly as possible.

Ryan built the process on research that shows readers scan a story in a predictable order for key information, first the photo, then headline, then caption, then lead. Maestro stories use those four entry points into the story to tell the *who*, *what*, *when*, *where* and *why* of the story, followed by the rest of the news story.

The Maestro Concept focuses the story on what the audience wants to know or have explained and puts that information in the most prominent places, including the photo, headline, caption, lead and sidebars. The maestro asks, “Why should our audience care?” and “What questions will come to the audience’s mind?” Then the maestro makes sure members of the maestro team help you answer those questions and display them prominently.

The Maestro's Job

The maestro, usually an editor, does what the maestro of a symphony does, that is, control the timing of all parts of orchestra and bring in each instrumental section as it is needed. In a newsroom, videographers may be the french horns, still photographers the trumpets, reporters the violins—including the concert master, that is the reporter—the page designer the cellos. Infographic designers play percussion, and editors writing and headlines and captions, play the double bass. Someone, the maestro, has to get them to playing their parts from the score, coming in at the right time and being as loud or soft as the maestro wants.

The Maestro Concept at Work: Finding the Story Idea

Someone brings a story idea from his beat to a staff story idea meeting. He saw in the online minutes of the last Parent Teacher Student Association meeting that seven volunteers are needed each morning next week during spring break to remove excess and out-of-date books and other material from the library.

Someone on staff says, "That's a lot of people! Seven people a day for five days. Are we going to have any books left?"

"I'll bet they are getting rid of a bunch of fiction, so we will read 'informational texts.' Everyone is always talking about informational texts and how they are on all the tests."

"I hope they don't just replace the books with titles for e-readers. I'd rather have a book. Besides, I read faster with a paper book."

"The new librarian is now called a 'media center specialist.' Do you suppose they are bringing in more computer resources? It won't do any good if we can't get to a computer because they are all busy."

The story seems to have strong news values: proximity, timeliness, impact and possibly conflict, and perhaps a local face to national trend. In addition the editor may see potential for good footage, sound and still photos as well as audience interactions, so she assigns you the story for preliminary research. She suggests you talk to the new media specialist/librarian. You and the editor create a list of a few questions you should ask.

Preliminary Research

You reach the library aide, who is there after school. She does not know what will happen to the books that are removed, and she is not sure, but she thinks the empty shelf space may be used for more non-fiction and informational texts because the district is big on informational reading. She guesses there will be hundreds of books pulled, since no one has gotten rid of any books in the 12 years she has been at the library, and maybe for many years before that. She thinks the media specialist/librarian gets to choose which books will go.

You go back to your editor, thinking you may be asked to write a couple of hundred words and take a photo of the newly empty shelves.

A Maestro Steps In: Three Questions

1. What is this story about in thirty or fewer words?
2. Why should a busy reader care about this story?
3. What does our audience want to know?

Fortunately your editor is a maestro and recognizes that the story may profit from team storytelling, the Maestro Concept, but not yet. But before she calls a team together, she asks you questions to see if you have enough information. If a team is called too early in the process, the

story could “blow up,” that is, turn out to be a different story than the one you thought you were reporting. You cannot plan maestro coverage on how computers are crowding out books until you find out if books are being thrown away to make room for more computers.

She asks, “Tell me what the story is about in 30 words or less.” (That is question one.)

“The library has asked for seven helpers each morning next week to throw out books from the library,” you reply.

“Why should a busy student or anyone else in our audience care about this?” she asks. (That is question two.)

“They must be getting rid of hundreds of books to need seven people for four hours over five days. Will they be getting rid of books anyone likes or needs? Will they replace any of the books they throw away, or will it be all digital? Will they buy more fiction or just informational reading? Lots of people hang out in the library before and after school. Will it be different? Will shelves be bare? What are they going to do with all the books they throw out?”

Your editor sees from your answers you are not ready for the third question, “*What does our audience want to know?*” You need to do more reporting before she calls a team. Together you generate a list of questions for the media specialist/librarian.

This time you go to the media specialist/librarian himself and come back with a full reporter’s notebook as well as a pamphlet from the state department of education on Weeding the School Library and a sheet of guidelines from the district. Your editor asks you again, “What is the story about in thirty words or less?” (That is question one.)

You answer, “The LLHS library will lose almost 3,000 volumes next week as volunteers purge the library of out-dated, inaccurate, worn out, duplicate or unused books.”

Your editor says, “Great! I think that is your lead or your nut graf.”

“Why should a busy member of our audience care?” she asks. (That is question two.)

You answer, “Many people hang out in the library before and after school. It is going to look and feel different now and people will wonder why it was changed. And most of us use the library and the library’s resources.”

“What will our audience want to know about the topic?” she asks. (That is question three.)

“People will want to know if new books will replace the old ones.

“People will want to know if we are just getting more ebooks or paper books. Not everyone likes—or has—a digital reader.”

“Are we getting more fiction or just ‘informational texts’?”

“The old books are going to end up being turned into pulp, while many people don’t have access to books, even in this country, let alone in other places. That is wasteful.”

The Maestro Team

Since you have strong answers to the three questions, your editor is satisfied that you are ready for a maestro team, even though you are not done with your reporting. You still need to go to the library while the books are being pulled, and you have a few more questions to ask. She calls together a maestro team that includes both verbal and visual journalists. Your media may control who is on the team. If you are solely a print publication, the team may include

- the reporter, you;
- an assistant reporter or researcher;
- a page designer;
- a photographer;
- a copy editor who will write the headlines, subheads and captions;
- a graphic artist; and
- a social media specialist.

If you also broadcast, you may want to add

- a videographer;
- a still photographer; and
- a sound engineer.

If you also post to the web, you may want to add

- a digital designer; and
- an interactive features designer.

In most newsrooms there will be only four or five people around the table, since some people can do many jobs. But even if you have an eight-armed photographer/videographer/sound engineer/social media specialist/reporter on your staff, it is good to have at least four people at the table for the first maestro meeting, so that many people collaborate.



What Could Go Wrong?

Not every story deserves a maestro team. Do not try it every time. Restrict the number of maestro stories to no more than one per page.

If one member of the team is unreliable, the package falls apart. If your graphic designer is a flake, you have no interactive map or graph. If your photographer misses the event, no photo will tell who and what. If your writer does not pay attention, you cannot answer your audience's questions.

If you call your Maestro meeting too soon, you may miss the very best parts of the story. If

you decide early that the blackboard wall story is about the need for expression in public spaces, you may never learn what your audience really wants to do before they die, or why a family thinks this may prevent a suicide.

If you underestimate your audience you may cover only stories about friends who cheat with each other's boyfriend or about video games with explosions. Sometimes you need to think about what your audience *should* be worrying about, not what they *seem* to be worried about.

The Planning Sheet

Your maestro conducts the meeting, which should only take ten or fifteen minutes. She asks you to relate the information you have for the story and your suggestions for how the story is to be covered. Together with the team, you hone in on the story's focus, what you reader wants to know and why they should care about your story.

Your team makes suggestions and designers offer sketches of the layout, which will communicate to the photographers what sort of pictures you need, horizontal or vertical, large or small, facing right or facing left. The sound engineer learns what sort of natural sound and actions to record. The videographer learns what to record, who to concentrate on. The social media editor knows what questions to ask to develop the sidebar. The copy editor or page editor suggests headlines and subheads. And you, the reporter and writer, know what more you need to learn and what you do *not* need to put into your lead. You know about the subheads and what you need to include in each subsection.

The maestro has the ability to decide whether the story will fill a double truck (a two-page center spread) or four columns on an upper right hand page, whether it is the lead story of a broadcast or a one-minute spot meant to lead your audience to the webpage.

She uses a planning sheet like the one in Figure A, tailored to your media, to keep track of the assignments and due date. It will be the maestro’s job to make sure all the elements come together.

These sheets are for an imaginary staff that does a weekly broadcast each Monday, posts stories to a web publication and does a monthly news magazine.

Story: _____ _____ What is this about in less than 30 words?		Who's on the team: _____ _____	
Audience: _____ Why should my audience care?		Maestro: _____ Social Media/Digital Media Specialist Reporter: _____ Interactive Media Specialist Page Designer/Graphic Artist: _____ Photographer/Videographer: _____ OtherEac: _____ Sound: _____	
Info: 1. _____ 4. _____ 2. _____ 5. _____ 3. _____ What three to five things does my audience want/need to know?		Alternate Story Forms Who's doing it/ Due date Podcast <input type="checkbox"/> Due: _____ Slideshow <input type="checkbox"/> Due: _____ Interview Clips <input type="checkbox"/> Due: _____ Historic/background visuals <input type="checkbox"/> Due: _____ Soundslides <input type="checkbox"/> Due: _____ Quote Collection <input type="checkbox"/> Due: _____ Chart: Pie, Bar, Graph <input type="checkbox"/> Due: _____ Map/Diagram <input type="checkbox"/> Due: _____ Timeline <input type="checkbox"/> Due: _____ Step by Step <input type="checkbox"/> Due: _____ Interactive Graphic <input type="checkbox"/> Due: _____ Map <input type="checkbox"/> Due: _____ Audience Interaction/Poll <input type="checkbox"/> Due: _____ Q & A <input type="checkbox"/> Due: _____ Glossary <input type="checkbox"/> Due: _____ Quiz <input type="checkbox"/> Due: _____ Checklist <input type="checkbox"/> Due: _____ Fast Facts Box <input type="checkbox"/> Due: _____ Art <input type="checkbox"/> Due: _____ Other <input type="checkbox"/> Due: _____	
Visual Point of Entry Into the Story (Photo, Art or Other)	Headline and Deck		
Who What When Where Why How (Circle the element it communicates.)	Who What When Where Why How (Circle the elements it communicates.)		
Due Date or Progress Check Date and Time: _____	Due Date or Progress Check Date and Time: _____		
Caption	Lead		
Who What When Where Why How (Circle the element it communicates.)	Who What When Where Why How (Circle the element it communicates.)		
Due Date or Progress Check Date and Time: _____	Due Date or Progress Check Date and Time: _____		
Sketch of Story Package: (rotate for vertical story) Circle Media for This Sketch: Digital Print Dimensions or Columns: _____			

Figure A



— YOUR TURN —

1. Locate a publication that seems to use the maestro process as it develops stories. Clip or download a strong package.
2. **Going Deeper.** Take the package apart using the Maestro Planning Form found on the *Journalism* website. Try to recreate what the journalists involved in making the package would have written in each of the form’s boxes.