So you want to write a newsletter article…

OKAY, SO YOU DON'T.

I know your type. The studious scientist. The detail-oriented,Type-A personality. You're more at home looking into a microscope than looking at a keyboard. You'd rather lay an acre of sod than write a report. You find writing a newsletter article something akin to chaperoning five of your daughter's 13-year old friends at a Justin Bieber concert.

I get it. You don't want to write a newsletter article. But let's suppose your chapter or the STMA says you need to write a newsletter article, kind of like when your spouse said you need to take those teenagers to the concert. You just line your pocket with some Extra Strength Tylenol tablets, grab the earplugs and gas up the minivan. "Justin, here we come."

So why not approach the newsletter assignment with that same level of enthusiasm? All you need to do is come up with a great story idea, gather the information and organize it into an interesting and intelligent story. It sounds so simple, but it's oh-so hard. But try to skip over this step, and it won't make any difference how effectively you execute the other steps. You can't write your way into a good story. It must start with a good story idea.

You probably won't get to that blood sweating stage over one little newsletter assignment, but you can make sure you don't go there by always being alert for story ideas and keeping a file of them. To help you get started on story ideas, it will probably be helpful to know the criteria most journalists use in determining if an idea is really newsworthy.

SO TELL ME, JUST WHAT IS THE NEWS?

First of all, a story idea must qualify on some basic measures of timeliness, proximity and audience. You must find a NOW element in the story you propose to tell. If you write about something that already happened and that your audience already knows all about, you are writing history—not news.

Proximity is quite easy to understand. Things that happen closer to home are more newsworthy than things that happen farther away. The development of a new mowing technique is more newsworthy if the innovation takes place in the U.S., or better yet, in your region, as opposed to the UK.

Finally, you must know your audience. If you are writing for other turf management association members, you can make certain assumptions about their base of knowledge. If you are writing for a more general audience such as the readers of your local newspaper, you must avoid those assumptions about those readers' understanding of your craft.

Once you've met the threshold on those three criteria, you should focus on the key elements of what makes an idea newsworthy, such as unusualness, prominence, conflict and impact.

The first time something happens we deem it unusual. The last time something happens we deem it unusual. Once an event happens with predictable regularity, you can't sell your idea to an audience on unusualness. So move on to another criterion.

Prominence is a significant element of newsworthiness. Names make news. If your are having a grand opening or launching a new program, get Sandra Bullock or Peyton Manning to make the announcement. That would give you something to write about.

Now consider conflict. This is one element you may have grown to hate. Love it and use it to your advantage. Many times conflict stems from battling bureaucracies. Let's say one state law requires you to do X and a federal law requires you to do an incompatible Y. That sounds like a story and one you can do without any hint of finding a villain or pointing a finger of blame.

Prominence is a significant element of newsworthiness. Names make news.

Mostly let's look for impact. If you find a story that affects a lot of people in a small way it's newsworthy. If you find a story that affects a small number of people in a significant way, that's also newsworthy. If you find a story that affects a large number of people in a very significant way, that is the most newsworthy of all. A drop in tax receipts leads to budget cuts which lead to the closing of two

parks which leads to cancellation of the entire fall youth soccer season. That would be big news, and it's big news based on impact.

Watch TV, listen to the radio, read the newspaper and surf the Web to learn the craft of news judgment. What kinds of stories interest you? In short, you must think like your audience to assess the newsworthiness of an idea.

The traditional standard of journalism demands a story cover the 5 W's and the H—who, what, why, when, where and how. Every story must include those elements. Often your previous experience and expertise will give you a head start on the fact base of the story. If the subject matter is an analysis of artificial turf vs. grass and the injury factor, you're probably pretty well-versed in the who, what, when and where of that story. Your additional information gathering will likely focus on more of the why and the how. That will help your story answer one key question, why would anyone want to read this?

As mentioned, some of the information base of your story can come from your previous knowledge. But be mindful of the need for attribution. You don't need attribution to state grass is green, but you do need to cite the study that shows a particular insecticide is harmful to the environment.

You're already quite aware of the vast number of Internet resources you can use to gather information. But once again, take the extra step of evaluation that information. First is the info believable; second, it is provable? Does it come from a reliable source, one without a vested interest?

To fill in the why and how you will need to interview knowledgeable sources, persons with first-hand information about your topic. Inexperienced writers often skip this step. They substitute their own opinion for the opinions of others. Unless you have great standing among the audience members you are writing for, you're best off taking the time to find experts other than yourself.

If you have done the proper work in gathering the who, what, when, where facts of the story, you should be able to conduct a concise and insightful interview. At the risk of oversimplification that means when you've found the right source, just ask that person why and how.

Actually, interviewing does have a more sophisticated set of protocols. Colleges offer entire courses in interviewing. But you can follow a few simple steps to make sure you cover the right ground.

• Open with a simple statement of who you are, why you are calling and the nature of your story. Ask the person if you've have him/her at a good time. Without showing off and without talking too much, you need to demonstrate you know enough about your topic that you will be asking good questions, understanding their answers and not spending time asking that person to do your basic homework. Friendly but business-like works every time.

• Zero in on the main issue you want to cover. This is where you really get into the why and how. Avoid questions that can be answered yes or no. Keep them open-ended so the interviewee can provide the context. Some good questions that often brings enlightened answers are, "What do you make of that?" or "Why do you think that way?" or "How did you arrive at that conclusion?"

World Cup World Class

TifSport was the grass of choice for Moses Mabhida Stadium for the 2010 World Cup in Durban, South Africa. No wonder it's also a favorite for professional, collegiate and high school fields right here in the USA. At Irving, Texas on the Dallas Cowboys practice fields. At the University of Oklahoma. At UNC and GA Tech. Football, soccer, baseball - any sport played on natural grass is a natural for TifSport Bermudagrass. If you're looking for a sports turf that can handle non-stop action, a cooler transition zone climate and heavy overseeding, TifSport's your answer. It's ideal for intramural fields, practice fields and gameday venues, where everything has to be perfect. Coaches and players love the way it looks and plays, and you and your crew will appreciate how easy it is to manage. TifSport can only be sold as certified sod or sprigs and only by licensed members of the TifSport Growers Assoc. For more information visit us at www.tifsport.com or call 706 552-4525.

• If you ever have to ask a pointed, controversial question, this is the time to do it. If the article is something of a controversial nature, you make have to challenge your source to explain the why and how. Be calm and be nice but be firm.

• If you had to ask your source a difficult question, don't end on that note. Ease out of that part of the conversation. Move into more neutral and non-controversial territory. Maybe follow up on something you covered earlier in the interview and ask for clarification.

• One of the best ways to close an interview is to ask the source if you left anything out. "Is there anything else I should know?" A final question might be, "Who else should I be talking to on this story?" The advantage of that question is that it gives you sponsorship when you call your next source.

Clearly, interviewing someone in person is the best choice. Think of it the same way you think of asking someone for a date. You not only get to hear what the person says, but can see how the person answers it. Notice, you rarely get turned down if you ask in person.

Don't go in with a list of prepared questions. Think of an interview as a conversation. You wouldn't bring notes to lunch with a friend. Don't use them in an interview situation. When you're reading your list, you're not listening, and listening is the key to a good interview.

You gathered the factual base. You interviewed the key sources to get the how and why so now you face a mountain of information and absolutely no clue in how to organize it. But organizing a story isn't as difficult as it may appear. One organizational scheme is called the Inverted Pyramid. Organize the story by starting with an opening sentence that delivers the most newsworthy elements of your story. (Go back and review the Story Idea section). We call that the lead sentence. Then follow it with information in descending order of importance. If you write a story that is 12 inches in length, and the editor only has room for an 11 inch story, you don't have to worry about the editor cutting off the final inch. It's the least important part of the story.

A more sophisticated way of writing a story goes by the name the Wall Street Journal Method, stemming from a style pioneered by, you guessed it, the Wall Street Journal. You have undoubtedly seen this form utilized numerous times. Every newspaper, magazine and Website uses it, at least on occasion. The WSJ method includes the following elements:

• Start with a descriptive, scene setting lead that focuses on a person most affected." No bureaucrats here, just common folk. If the story centers on "no fall soccer leagues," start with a description of a lone boy, dribbling his soccer ball in the back yard. Develop the idea that last year at this time he was playing on a team in a city parks and rec league and enjoying the competition with the other 10-year olds.

• Have the last line of the anecdotal lead set up a quote, in this case, from the young boy's Mom. "Larry was so active then and absolutely loved soccer. Without soccer this year, he seems to have lost interest in school."

• The origin of the term nut graf is a hard to nail down. The concept is easy. This paragraph should explain two things: why I am writing this story and why now. So the nut graf on our soccer story might be, "The other 10-year olds in Riverville are also stuck on the soccer sidelines this fall. A shortfall in tax collections led to cuts in the city budget. The Parks and Recreation Department had already spent most of its money for the year, so the only thing left to cut was the fall youth soccer program. The fallout over those cuts has been great."

• Use the nut graf as your outline for the rest of the story. In our soccer story, we would first explain the tax shortfall, then the budget cuts, then the dropping of the soccer program and finally, the fallout from that. In short, if you nail the nut graf, the story practically writes itself after that.

"On the other hand"—you may need to include a paragraph or two about the other side of the story. Perhaps the elimination of the city program has led to schools to look at starting soccer programs.

If you use the WSJ method of story organization, you are committing yourself to being a storyteller. And every good story must have an ending. Often that ending can evolve from your anecdotal lead. Maybe we go back to our young boy in the backyard with his soccer ball. Most often the close has a strong element of what lies ahead, what comes next. Maybe he's thinking about trying out for the flag football league or maybe he's looking at starting his own neighborhood soccer league.

You can also tell a story without a using the WSJ format. Just tell a story.

As mentioned before, inexperienced newsletter article writers often err by not interviewing any other sources and as a result, substitute their own opinions. Once the writer figures out he/she needs to interview other sources, the writer goes the opposite direction and becomes quote happy.

Regardless of the format of the story, put yourself on a quote diet. Be sparing. Do not use quotes to state facts, stats or data. Use quotes to bring out opinions, feelings, things that only that person could say. Do not use quotes to introduce a new piece of information. Use them only to reinforce a point you have already made. Keep your quotes short for better impact. Think of a quote as a punch line.

If you find yourself drifting into a sentence-quote- sentence-quote-sentence-quote- sentence-quote- sentence-quote pattern, usually in the back half of a story, change it. You can use information from a quote in narrative form, an indirect quote.

Remember, many professional journalists have taken four or five semesters of college course work in those elements of story ideas, gathering and story organization. Don't be frustrated if it doesn't come natural. You might want to invite a reporter over to your place of business and ask for some advice on the various approaches for fall overseeding. It won't help your writing, but you will feel better about your struggles with it. ■

Dr. Max Utsler teaches journalism at the University of Kansas. He is a former TV journalist and has trained business executives in how to deal with the media for the past 25 years.

This is the final in a series of seven articles in the 2010 Ewing Professional Development Series. STMA and Ewing have again partnered in this series to bring sports turf industry professional development and career issues to the forefront. For more information, go to www.STMA.org or www.Ewing1.com.