



## Nuts & Bolts

A Los Angeles Times newsletter dedicated to the proposition that there are only two kinds of journalists: bad ones, and those who are improving

Edited by [Bob Baker](#)

Issue 20 September, 2000

### **Creating that explosive first stride**

In our last issue we talked about rhythm as one variable you can improve when you're giving your copy an extra read. Consider acceleration as another area to check: How many grafs or words does it take to move your story from zero to 60 mph, to encircle the theme, to let the reader know where the hell he or she is headed? How can you get to that point sooner?

I. For starters, check out how quickly Business' P.J. Huffstutter put you in the shoes of a woman with the world's worst commute and established the economic and sociological context for this strange behavior:

The shrill scream of the alarm clock wakes the darkened Toluca Lake home, rousing Laura O'Brien at her usual hour--3:30 a.m. The real estate broker rolls out of bed with a groan and takes the first step of her daily 1,000-mile journey into commuter hell.

Going to work means leaving her Los Angeles suburban home and boarding a Southwest Airlines plane for San Jose. Every day. For the last three years, O'Brien has spent each weekday in Silicon Valley working on real-estate deals for high-tech companies. The time-strapped 42-year-old finds empty office space for her clients to lease--and anything else they need to set up shop.

Two grafs—and only two grafs—to meet Laura and her burden. Now to the question of what Laura represents:

As the glimmer of Internet wealth in Northern California sparks an explosion of gold-rush dreams, the ordinary acts of everyday life have become extraordinary challenges for modern workers. In this dot-com age, an average workday means pulling a 12- or 14-hour stretch at the office. Time off has become an outdated concept. And going to the office can mean boarding a commercial airplane.

That such commutes even exist is an irony in today's wired culture, as technology has long promised to make face-to-face meetings obsolete. Yet in an age of videoconferencing and e-mail, corporate America has realized that the most crucial business relationships must be

nurtured in person, not by modem.

Only now, in the fifth graf, do you get more on Laura herself:

O'Brien, who works for real estate giant CB Richard Ellis Inc., will fly more than 200,000 miles this year. For O'Brien, the daily commute is the central force of her life, around which everything else revolves. Her health. Her identity. Her relationships.

The foreshadowing allows the story to move into its day-in-the-life narrative style by the sixth graf:

O'Brien's husband, Peter, is still asleep this Wednesday morning. As he peacefully snoozes, she makes dozens of calls and checks piles of e-mail from contacts in Asia and Europe. Fingers dancing over the keyboard, she pauses to snatch up a cup of espresso and...

What's most impressive about this lead is what's not there: any number of small, evocative details that would have painted an even deeper picture but at the expense of slowing you down before you decided whether or not to stay with the story. This is a crucial balancing act—detail vs. perspective—in profiles that seek to tell us how the world works. In the same way a design engineer eliminates any unnecessary friction, the writer removes as many obstacles as possible to reach and maintain cruising speed.

II. Another example of acceleration was Dexter Filkins' piece about Afghanistan's plague of land mines. The essence of the story was the collective horror—no one anecdote could tell it. So Dexter encircled the story in three graf. He used a five-word notion to quickly engage your imagination, a litany of quick nameless examples in the second graf, and a litany of staccato observations in the third. That's only 98 words—check out how much they accomplish:

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan -- Everywhere, the city is booby-trapped.

A woman returns to her home after five years in a refugee camp, opens a door and loses her life. A bus crammed with wedding day revelers runs over a mine and 45 die. A farmer wades into his field, walks around, loses a leg.

Six years after the shooting stopped in this city, the mines are still claiming victims. So are old grenades, unexploded shells and even bombs that look like toy butterflies. Children play among the mines, women step around them. A few times a week, another one explodes.

Most things you do to your copy to make it read faster also make it read clearer. On the Flesch reading-ease evaluation program, which rates stories on a scale of 1 to 100, 100 being the easiest to understand, Dexter's first three graf scored a 69. That's more than twice as easy a read as the average Times story. It's equal to a 6th-grade reading level; most of our prose reads at 12th-grade complexity or above.

Now, having swiftly placed you amidst the danger, Dexter draws you in even deeper with one boy's story:

Rohibullah Amidullah, 16, was swimming in the creek that runs through town when his foot came down on something hard. An old land mine exploded, and Rohibullah's left leg blew apart below the knee. His buddies, still soaking from their swim, carried him to the hospital.

"I thought I had stepped on a stone," said Rohibullah, his stump wrapped in a bandage.

A quarter-century of modern war has turned Afghanistan into the most heavily mined country in the world, a junkyard of unexploded...

III. Does speed require jettisoning anecdotal leads? Not always. Chuck Philips found a way to illustrate the music industry's technological backwardness, but it required him to use short sentences and strip all unnecessary detail—in short, to write in a practically smart-ass voice:

Next month, after two years of planning, the world's biggest record company will unveil its answer to Internet piracy.

Seagram's Universal Music Group will start selling digital downloads on the Web, hoping against reason that fans will cough up \$2 each for songs they still can easily download elsewhere for free.

It's a Hail Mary shot that few executives believe will work.

Universal's "bulletproof" technology is too unwieldy and too expensive, costing more to operate than fans want to pay for the music itself. But worst of all, it's really not bulletproof. Sources inside the company say the encryption code is likely to be hacked and rendered obsolete before the corporation ever makes a penny on its investment.

Still, all the music companies have similar plans.

This is just the latest blunder by the music industry, which has managed to miss every major development on the Internet. And Seagram isn't the only laughingstock online. EMI, Time Warner, Sony and Bertelsmann also are flailing in cyberspace.

Now, that's five set-up grafs until the payoff ("This is just the latest blunder...") but those are not traditional L.A. Times grafs. They use only 126 words (less than eight words per sentence) and they're small words (averaging five characters). The simplicity (7th-grade reading level), structure and conversational tone make a complex topic understandable.

(For those of you interested in testing your work against the Flesch scale, it's included in Microsoft Word software. From your PC, hit "Tools," then run the story through the "Spelling and Grammar" check. PS: Make sure your "Options" within "Tools/Spelling and Grammar" has a check by the "Show Readability Statistics" box. It's easier than it sounds.)

IV. It's not only your choice of words that allows you to get off the dime quickly. It's also the way you conceptualize the story. When Israel elected a new president, Mary Curtius wanted to explain the symbolism of his Middle Eastern roots. She went to his hometown, where we could see the impact at ground zero:

KIRYAT MALACHI, Israel—Nowhere in Israel was Moshe Katsav's election to the presidency welcomed with more joy than in this hardscrabble southern town that he calls home.

Katsav's upset victory over Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shimon Peres this week is not just the biggest thing that has happened here, Kiryat Malachi residents said. It may also be the biggest thing that has happened to the nation's have-nots—primarily immigrants from Middle Eastern

countries and their descendants, who make up 40% of the Jewish population of Israel but have long felt locked out of its corridors of power.

“Today the Berlin Wall that separated the people artificially has fallen,” said Rabbi Yosef Azran, a leader of the ultra-Orthodox Shas Party, after its members helped Katsav secure his election.

The first two grafs—three sentences—told the story. The sentence length was long (33-word average) but the language was bold and efficient. Look, for example, at the second sentence of the second graf, and its concise definition of the “have-nots.”

V. Acceleration is a key ingredient in what is often appreciated too generally as “style.” Watch how much gets done in very little space in Faye Fiore’s pre-GOP convention piece about Texas:

1. The story establishes the extreme character of Texas as the story theme:

HOUSTON—When God was handing out bluster and bravado, Texas must have been first in line because everything in Texas is bigger and better than anywhere else. Just ask a Texan.

2. It fills in the details that were hinted at in the lyrical first graf:

They have the biggest sky, tastiest barbecue, best flag, friendliest people, lowest taxes, most oil, prettiest sunsets and, for good measure, they invented the two-step. In Texas, tourists don’t walk around in T-shirts that say “I Love Texas.” Texans do.

3. It creates the essential contrast that under girds the story—the two sides of Texas’ image--using the same kind of clipped, specific images that made graf 2 work. Look how punchy Faye makes the second sentence, a verb hitting you about every seven words:

But a different picture of the Lone Star State has emerged in the fevered pitch of the presidential campaign. This Texas is an abyss where capitalism breeds without social conscience, the air is dirty, children go without health insurance and the execution chamber is an assembly line of mean-spirited vengeance.

4. Having created the contrast, the story explains how the issue weighs not only on both candidates but on the state itself:

The presidential race has been almost as much a test of Texas forbearance as it has of the state’s governor and GOP presidential nominee-to-be, Gov. George W. Bush. The months-long hyperscrutiny has underscored and sometimes magnified the state’s every flaw—as Al Gore, the presumed Democratic nominee, sought to do during a trip to the state Thursday.

5. Here’s another detail-vs.-perspective moment: A lot of writers would have felt obligated to quote Gore at this point, but Faye knows the greater good lies in first showing how the Democrats’ obsession with making Texas an evil empire has spread into popular culture:

Texas is now a benighted standard by which awful things are measured. The state that practically invented the frontier spirit, where law and order reign and “Don’t mess with Texas” stickers are state-sanctioned graffiti, is late-night fodder for Jay Leno monologues:

“Bush has a new bumper sticker: ‘Vote for me or I’ll have you executed.’”

“Everybody celebrates St. Patrick’s Day in a different way. Like in New York, it’s the big parade. In Chicago, they dye the river green. And in Texas today, they executed a leprechaun.”

“The entire state now stands as proxy for W. Bush, under attack for political reasons,” crabbed Molly Ivins, a syndicated Fort Worth Star-Telegram columnist. “The rest of the country

likes to look down on Texas as a nest of yahoos, racists and rednecks.’’

Let’s keep going. Only in the 9th graf is it time to focus on Gore:

A Democratic Party Web site advises unvaccinated tourists to stay out of Texas, given a new federal report that shows Houston has the lowest immunization rate for children among major U.S. cities. And Gore, during his stop in San Antonio on Thursday, decried the state’s low ranking in several health, education and social-service categories.

“This is a wonderful state, but I think it should be a state where it is just as easy to raise a child as set up an oil rig,’’ Gore said.

11. Now it’s time for the story to compare perception to reality:

Texas is neither the backwater its detractors claim nor the jewel its natives tout. But it’s a bit of both.

Texas is home to the world’s largest medical center, in Houston, yet one-quarter of its residents have no health insurance. It has one of the best university systems in the country and one of the worst high school dropout rates. It is at the forefront of the technological economy, yet medieval scenes of poverty play out along its borders.

It is “Star Wars’’ and Charles Dickens all wrapped up in a land mass the size of France, a state with...

If you’ve got an extra 10 minutes, go to TimesOnline and read the rest of the story, which ran on July 21. It’s a terrific heaping of information, interpretation and zest in little more than 40 inches.

VI. Acceleration comes only through painful, often courageous decisions. Mark Arax’s recent profile of L.A. powerbroker Eli Broad was an elegant read, but that craftsmanship rested on a key decision about what to leave out.

Mark explains:

How do you profile someone who has been profiled in major newspapers and magazines a dozen times, a man so wealthy and formidable that none of his friends or enemies can speak in an honest or original way about him?

You damn well hope he says something interesting.

This was the riddle when confronted with Eli Broad, the billionaire insurance man and philanthropist who seems to pop up everywhere in Los Angeles. One answer might have been to forget about him, but that was hard to do on the eve of a Democratic National Convention he had helped deliver to the city.

A quick peek at the clips showed that the same five or six power brokers were quoted in nearly every Broad profile, saying pretty much the same thing. Broad’s own quotes seemed stuck on a single eight-track. One anecdote about him buying a well-known painting for millions and then charging the purchase to his credit card (so done to donate the frequent flier miles) appeared five times in various tellings.

Pete King, my editor, wondered if a micro approach might work. Broad had gotten nearly everyone to forget about his previous life as America’s biggest home builder, the man who did more to sprawl Los Angeles than anyone else. Wasn’t there just a slight bit of contradiction in his missionary zeal to now revive a downtown that had suffered in the march of all those

subdivisions?

By focusing on this paradox, and using a tour of L.A. past and present with Broad as guide, the story had a chance of offering up something different. Still, the challenge was to get Broad off cruise control, not an easy thing to do.

Freed up from the obligation of interviewing his friends, colleagues, associates—getting quotes that other journalists had already gotten better—I was able to spend extra time preparing for our interview.

The offbeat questions seemed to perk Broad up. He talked for hours about his parents and their Socialist politics, the summers he spent as a kid in the Catskills attending Workmen’s Circle camps, his role in sprawling Los Angeles and the ills of such growth. And the device of the tour not only helped capture his outsized energy and ego but provided a simple narrative line.

Even so, before I sat down to write, my old school training gnawed at me. I didn’t possess a single comment from someone other than Broad. I picked up the phone and made a few obligatory calls. Every quote I got seemed a leftover from someone else’s banquet. I decided to keep these comments in the notebook but the effort wasn’t wasted. The gist of these interviews helped bolster the story’s authority and voice. What I had, in the end, was Broad. He had managed to tell on himself.

The piece was barely more than 60 inches. In most writers’ hands it would have been 50% longer. Mark’s decision to find a distinctive story theme and ride it—not falling prey to second-rate, obligatory detail—made the difference. Historically, we have published inflated profiles out of a sense of “responsibility” or “completeness.” Editors have tortured reporters with questions or considerations that only editors—not normal readers—would ask about. Inevitably the effect is to make the piece bog down or tail off. We are not writing for the ages or the sages. We are writing to shed enlightenment within harsh confines of space and time. In that environment, it pays to increase the tempo of your song.

Here’s what Mark’s sounded like:

1. Establish the contrast:

In another life, before Eli Broad became a billionaire insurance man and savior of downtown, before he helped deliver the Democratic National Convention to Los Angeles and loomed over the city’s art and philanthropy like J. Paul Getty’s ghost, he reigned as the King of Sprawl.

2. Detail the first life:

From the late 1950s to the late 1980s, Broad built more houses across suburbia than any man in America, changing the face of big cities from California to New Jersey. No builder did more to spread Los Angeles from sea to mountain to desert than Broad. He lured baby boomers to the land of one-

hour commutes with four-bedroom ranch houses, wall-to-wall carpet, fully equipped kitchens, two-car garages and an orange tree in every yard—a dream had for \$25,990.

3. Detail the current life:

These days, the 67-year-old chairman of SunAmerica, a financial giant that sells insurance and mutual funds to baby boomers turned gray, pours his considerable energy and fortune into reviving a downtown eviscerated by decades of suburban growth.

4. His observation:

“It’s a paradox. Yes, it’s a paradox,” he said. “But it isn’t penance.”

#### 5. Overview of the change in a broader context:

Even in this land famous for third acts and deathbed conversions, Broad’s life is remarkable for its transformations. He has emerged as arguably the city’s most powerful unelected leader through a series of incarnations, four distinct lives that would seem to add up to a profound contradiction. But to hear Broad describe it, as he guides you on a dizzying back-seat tour of his life—and not coincidentally the life of Los Angeles from midcentury forward—it all seems like an easy evolution.

#### 6. Parallelism illustrates the four lives and the contrasts within each:

The boy who attended Socialist camp in the Catskills grows up to be a billionaire five times over and a liberal with no love for unions. The man who made his first fortune on the low art of the stucco tract house becomes one of the nation’s foremost collectors of modern art and a patron of the finest architects. The man whose far-flung subdivisions sucked life out of the core of Los Angeles now devotes his life to turning downtown into a rival of Manhattan. The man who built his first house in Huntington Beach and his last in Moreno Valley—a legacy encompassing hundreds of miles of freeways and shake roofs and strips malls—hosts a convention of Democrats who have declared war on sprawl.

We are then plopped into Broad’s black sedan and taken on a tour of downtown, until the 20th graf, where Mark begins the biography:

It was easy once to underestimate him. He was the only child of a house painter and a seamstress barely removed from the Jewish ghettos of Lithuania. He grew up in a six-story walk-up in the Bronx where secrets were spoken in Yiddish and...

### Middle management

Admit it, you’re lead-obsessed. We all are. (This newsletter is.) There’s good reason: The lead not only determines whether a reader joins you for the ride, but it foreshadows many aspects of the journey and creates a rhythm for the writer to follow. But this obsession too often saps our concentration on the middle of the story—that place where the story gathers itself for the stretch run, where the difference between thin and full-bodied stories is decided.

One quality the middle of your story ought to have, particularly if it is a news feature, is a passage that takes the reader to a deeper, more intense understanding of the story. If you’re writing a story with a protagonist, the middle is the place to stretch out an anecdote that reveals him or her. If you’re writing a story with three or four characters or events that are part of a trend, the middle is where you choose one experience or event and peel back the layers. This is less a statistical calculation (we’re not talking about an exact middle) than a sensibility that defines the middle third of the piece.

A story by Hector Tobar about the spread of Spanish-language radio stations to middle American towns is a good illustration. The lead sent us on our way:

LIBERAL, Kan.—The Friday afternoon deejay has been known to miss his show because he’s at his other job, pounding nails at a construction site. The newscaster spends most of her day selling jewelry. And the guy running the station is simply glad to be there: It beats his last job,

working behind the counter at an auto parts store.

So it goes at KYUU, the little ranchera station on the prairie, 1,000 watts of Spanish-language music and talk beamed 24/7 to the beef workers, housewives and young homies of southwest Kansas.

If black thunderclouds start to build over the high Plains and the wind kicks up, one of the station's half-dozen staff members will rush to the microphone to transmit a tornado alerta. More often they broadcast the quirky musings of deejays like El Chulo de la Mañana, the Handsome Morning Guy.

KYUU is one of the newest outposts in Spanish-language radio's long march across the United States...

The first 21 grafs set up a picture of these stations, gave us a quick look at the kind of people who operate them, the distinctive promotions they use and made brief references to two specific stations beyond KYUU.

And then it was time for the middle, and to take you deeper, with a 14-graf mini-profile of one DJ at another station:

In Rupert, Idaho, the local Spanish-language station, which calls itself La Fantastica, rises from a beet field on the edge of town. Former Mormon missionary Benjamin Reed holds court weekday afternoons as a Wolfman Jack-style deejay called El Chupacabras, the name of the mythical goat-devouring creature that was a 1990s boogeyman in the Caribbean and Mexico.

"Chupacabras, please play something by Los Temerarios," one female caller asks.

"Of course," Reed answers. As the song "I Did You Wrong" plays, Reed asks into the telephone: "What station has your sound?" ("Cual es la que suena?")

"La Fantastica y El Chupacabras!" the caller shouts back.

For Reed, an Idaho native who became fluent in Spanish while living in Argentina, becoming El Chupacabras is the fulfillment of a long-held ambition. After 14 years in English-language television and radio, he's finally getting a chance to emulate his heroes, deejays like the legendary Pepe Garza of Que Buena, a Los Angeles station.

"Even though I was born here, I identify myself as Hispanic culturally," Reed says. Slipping into Spanish, he continues: "The gringo is a closed person. A Latino is more open, warm. Working here is my dream job. Sure, I'm in a small market. Sure I'm in a beet field. But there's so much freedom. When I'm on La Fantastica I become a different character."

In English he's simply Benjamin Reed, the host of a talk-radio show on KFTA's sister English-language station, KBAR. But in Spanish, which he speaks without a noticeable accent, he is "Ben-ha-meen Roberto Reed!" He flavors his show with the sound effects that are the calling card of Latin American radio, a cacophony of "stingers" and "lasers," and many echoes, all generated by turning the knobs on a machine.

"You're listening to La Fantastica-a-a-a..."

"I want it fast, hard-paced. I try to get that out of my jocks too," says Reed, who is training a handful of locals to be disc jockeys. "In Spanish, you get to do the fun stuff that people used to do on AM."

Moments after Reed goes on the air, the phone starts to ring off the hook inside KFTA's

claustrophobic control room. From all around the towns that surround Rupert, the Spanish-speaking people of southern Idaho's Magic Valley call in with requests.

“People out there are working hard. They're in the fields, they're milking cows,” Reed says. “But when they hear me, they feel they have a friend.”

The next morning, when Reed takes up his other job at the English-language talk-radio station, the mood couldn't be more different. He tries to strike up a conversation with his listeners about Elian Gonzalez and Janet Reno, taking a conservative tack. No one bites.

“No is one calling,” he says on the air. For a moment, he turns surly. “It's kind of frustrating. I guess they're part of the 60% of the public that's apathetic. They don't care what dictator Reno is doing.”

Most Spanish-speaking listeners in southern Idaho don't know that Reed has this other radio persona. They aren't much inclined to listen to English-language radio, which is dominated locally by country music and syndicated talk-radio programs. KFTA has the Spanish-language audience all to itself.

And, with that, Hector transitioned back to the station that was the anecdotal lead...

But in southwest Kansas, KYUU in Liberal does face some local competition from another Spanish radio station, KZQD, Radio Libertad.

...for 14 more grafs about KYUU's heritage and struggles, which would end the story.

Hector said he was attracted to Benjamin Reed on KFTA because “he brings something unique to the story—someone's love for another culture. It adds texture and depth to the story. It doesn't just advance the thesis. It offers a deeper picture of the world the story's about. And it's an illustration of the surprises you find when you're reporting one thing and find a tangent.”

It illustrates, too, why in some cases we need to publish long stories. Hector's piece was 77 inches—long for a discussion of yet another example of the spread of Latino culture, but appropriately long because of the insight the reader gained by meeting Benjamin Reed in the middle of the journey.

### Cliché of the month

It's hard to live in a world this pressurized. One hallmark is the number of times something is “ratcheted up.” Times writers seems unable to resist the lure of a word that drips with tension. Consider the eight uses in a recent six-week period:

Federal agencies have had to quickly ratchet up their knowledge of the perils of Ecstasy and their enforcement efforts. (Metro, July 27)

Deductible contribution limits would ratchet up for all taxpayers to... (Business, July 21)

Chile relleno casero takes a fairly classic Mexican favorite and ratchets it up a notch or two. (Valley restaurant review, July 7)

...the indicted leader continues to ratchet up his assault on the Serbian people. (Sunday Opinion, July 2)

Metro Rail is a critical cog in the larger social engine of the city, because it helps ratchet up the sense of cosmopolitanism that makes cities worth living in. (Calendar, June 25)

The arrival of the Japanese team ratchets up the competition. (Orange County Sports, June 22)

Bus and train operators for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority voted overwhelmingly Monday to authorize a strike, hoping to ratchet up pressure on the agency to agree on a new contract. (Metro, June 20)

Pyongyang has previously thrived on creating conflict. But Kwak, of the unification institute, argues that the Northern leader is unlikely now to reverse course and ratchet up military tensions. (Foreign, June 16)

It's not that "ratcheting" is wrong, it's that we dilute its power when we use it this often. Editors need to do a better job of asking writers whether there's another verb that would give more definition to the image the story is trying to promote. In some of the examples above, the choice of verb is almost incidental; it's far less important than the controlling idea. "Ratchet" seems to have been used for effect; "increase" would have done the job just fine.

Thanks to Bobbie Olson ("...next time I see it, I'm going after someone with a ratchet wrench!") for the suggestion.

Used with the permission of journalist-author [Bob Baker](#)