



# Nuts & Bolts

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## Knowing when to delay the anecdote

Nothing tugs harder at a reporter with a complex story than the promise of an anecdotal lead, a way to quickly personalize the abstract and set the stage for a broader proclamation of the story theme.

And nothing falls apart more quickly.

The reason is the problem that sent you to the Anecdote Solution in the first place: life is too damned complicated. Too often, the anecdote requires too many grafts to make it work. Still other times, even when the anecdote can be compressed into a couple of grafts, it may simply be a way of hiding from the awful truth: You've got a news story on your hands, and you ought to tell it like one.

Let's start with the latter problem: the news story masquerading as a feature. Consider a story we published in October that, until about 9 p.m., was written like this:

### THE ANECDOTE

On the day Christy McKinney turned 21, she was running an errand with her 7-month-old son, Conner, in her Ford Explorer when the tread on her left rear tire peeled loose, causing her car to sail off an embankment on Interstate 40 near Alma, Ark.

The sport-utility vehicle rolled over twice. Conner was ejected from his baby seat, suffering cuts and bruises to his face. He was the lucky one. His mother was thrown from the vehicle--even though she was wearing her seatbelt, according to her attorney--and landed on the highway's grassy shoulder. McKinney and her son were rushed to a hospital in nearby Fort Smith, where doctors declared her a quadriplegic.

### THE NEWS

The toll from defective Firestone tires mounted on Ford Explorers has largely been measured by the 101 deaths compiled so far by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. But as investigators delve into about 400 injury cases, story after horrific story emerges, some involving people who have become paraplegics or quadriplegics.

These victims will have to cope with the fact that their life expectancies have been shortened as they face the prospect of raising enough money--sometimes millions of dollars--to pay looming medical bills. The costs also include an emotional toll, changing the lives of these victims' families who must now grapple with caring for their loved ones.

### BACK TO THE ANECDOTE

In McKinney's case, her mother, Sheri, was recently forced to give up her job, leave her own 13-year-old son behind, and borrow money from friends and relatives so that she could watch over Christy, who has been transferred to Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago.

Christy cannot speak, but her mother can read her lips.

"Everyday I dry her tears [that] roll down her cheeks when she says, 'I miss my baby,' " said Sheri, 39. "I try to hold myself together. I can't let her see me fall apart. But she is my baby and her crying makes me cry."

#### BACK TO THE NEWS

NHTSA officials said they don't know how many people have ended up like Christy--seriously injured as a result of an accident involving defective Firestone tires.

The 101 reported deaths and 400 injuries over several years are a small fraction of the 41,611 deaths and 3.2 million injuries caused by traffic collisions last year alone. About 8,000 of those injured are people who will never walk again, according to officials with the National Spinal Cord Injury Assn., who say the numbers of people left paralyzed in Firestone-related crashes has shed new light on the financial and emotional costs associated with such debilitating injuries.

The rising toll of casualties is also bringing fresh attention to the tendency of some vehicles' roofs to cave in during rollover accidents, which can cause fatal or crippling head and neck injuries. Consumer safety advocates...

And so it went until an hour or so before the home-edition deadline, when Deputy Managing Editor Leo Wolinsky decided that the back-and-forth shuffle between poignancy and news should be replaced by a hard-news story. Leo felt we had published so many stories about the human tragedy of the Firestone/Ford controversy that this story would unfairly suffer from a feeling of sameness.

So the published story proclaimed the news first:

The toll from defective Firestone tires mounted on Ford Explorers has largely been measured by the 101 deaths counted so far, but as investigators delve into about 400 injury cases they are finding horrific tragedies that have left some victims paraplegics or quadriplegics.

These victims will have to cope with shortened life expectancies as they face the prospect of raising enough money--sometimes millions of dollars--to pay looming medical bills. The costs also include an emotional toll, changing the lives of these victims' families who must now grapple with caring for their loved ones.

The focus on the news allowed a third graf that explained the causes of the maiming more fully, giving the piece more immediate perspective:

The number of people left paralyzed in these crashes is also bringing fresh attention to the tendency of some vehicles' roofs to cave in during rollover accidents, which can cause fatal or crippling head and neck injuries. Consumer safety advocates have criticized the auto makers for not strengthening roofs and NHTSA for not toughening the roof-crush standard.

A close look at some of these tragedies, alongside an analysis of government crash data, shows that in many cases the human cost was raised by occupants simply not wearing their seat

belts. But in others, the violence of the crash--and the damage to the vehicle--was so extreme that wearing a seat belt was not enough to save passengers or drivers from death or crippling injuries.

Then, in the fifth graf, having established the institutional context, the story gave us the Christy McKinney story in five consecutive grafes:

Consider the case of Christy McKinney.

On the day she turned 21, McKinney was running an errand with her 7-month-old son, Conner, in her Ford Explorer when the tread on her left rear tire peeled loose, causing her car to sail off an embankment on Interstate 40 near Alma, Ark.

The sport-utility vehicle rolled over twice. Conner was ejected from his baby seat, suffering...

From there, the story returned to the macrocosm.

The lesson is that if you have real news, use real news. As the writer, Davan Maharaj, puts it: Although the anecdote was gripping and maybe powerful, it still couldn't cut to the chase fast enough. My humble feeling is that we often try to play on readers' emotions to draw them into stories. They would read on if you were honest with them from the start, and if they were interested in the topic. I'm now a convert to the belief that any time you can use a straight lede instead of an anecdotal one, go with the straight one. Reader reaction to this piece also confirmed that it worked.

### **Knowing when to distill the anecdotes**

Bill Rempel and Rick Serrano's investigation of Texas' concealed-handgun law was another example of balancing news and color. No one anecdote could serve this story, because it was about the cumulative effect of the law. And yet the key to understanding the impact was the litany of what various individuals did with their gun permits. So the story hit you hard for two grafes...

AUSTIN, Texas -- In 1995, four months into his first term as governor, George W. Bush signed a bill ending a 125-year ban on concealed handguns in Texas. The new law, he vowed, would make the state "a safer place," and he promised Texans that license applicants would undergo rigorous background checks.

But since the law took effect, the state has licensed hundreds of people with prior criminal convictions--including rape and armed robbery--and histories of violence, psychological disorders and drug or alcohol problems, a Times investigation has found.

...and then, for the next two grafes, distilled the bare-bones details about six cases that would be detailed later on:

James W. Washington got a license to carry a concealed weapon despite having done prison time in Texas for armed robbery. So did Terry Ross Gist, who left a trail of threats and violence

in court records from North Carolina to California. A license also went to an elderly Dallas man with Alzheimer's disease.

Still others committed crimes, ranging from double murder to drunk driving, after they were licensed. A frustrated commuter, Paul W. Lueders, shot and severely wounded a Houston bus driver. Audi Phong Nguyen ran with a Houston home invasion ring. Diane Brown James helped her husband kidnap a San Antonio woman to be their sex slave.

Then back to the macro to continue establishing the sweep of the problem:

About 215,000 Texans are currently licensed to carry concealed weapons. The state concedes that...

### **Knowing when to reject the anecdote**

Jennifer Oldham's first draft of her scoop about the danger of certain home furnaces employed a semi-featurized lead because the concept was unfamiliar to most readers. She graciously shares it with us:

On chilly nights this fall, tens of thousands of unsuspecting California homeowners will turn on attic furnaces similar to those that fire investigators say sparked numerous catastrophic blazes across the state over the last 10 years.

Federal safety experts and furnace makers and distributors have known for years that horizontal attic furnaces manufactured by Consolidated Industries ignited dozens of fires in single-family residences, townhomes and condominiums from San Jose to San Diego.

Yet the government, the manufacturer, and the 30 distributors who sold these attic furnaces under various brand names in the state from 1984 to 1992, have never issued a recall or a formal warning urging homeowners to get these units inspected and replaced.

"These things are latent time bombs in peoples' attics and they don't know about them," said Dan Mogin, a San Diego attorney who this summer filed a class action lawsuit against Sears, a Consolidated distributor. "The Consumer Products Safety Commission has absolutely dropped the ball on this."

But Jennifer switched to a hard-news approach after recognizing the quality of her material. Notice that she used five grafs of news before a quote (rather than three in the first draft), and that she found a quote that provided a more satisfying transition from the news:

Defective attic furnaces manufactured by a now-bankrupt firm have caused scores of residential fires in California in the last decade, fire inspectors and federal investigators said.

Hundreds of thousands of unsuspecting homeowners may be at risk from these furnaces, made by Indiana-based Consolidated Industries and sold under various brand names in California from 1984 to 1992, these sources said.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission, the independent federal agency responsible for warning citizens about defective products, has known about the problem since the mid-1990s. It

said Tuesday it will issue a warning today about the furnaces.

The commission's staff said it didn't issue a warning earlier because federal law prohibits it from doing so while it is in negotiations seeking a product recall. The agency said it had hoped to issue a recall, but was unable to do so when Consolidated—which would have been required to finance this action--went out of business.

The lack of a recall or warning to date had created a sense of foreboding among many fire-prevention officials.

"Every time we have a cold snap we have a furnace fire," said Michael Freige, a senior fire inspector for the Torrance Fire Department, who said Consolidated furnaces have caused seven residential fires there since 1994.

The issuance of a warning without a recall means that homeowners probably will have to foot the bill...

Similarly, Greg Miller eschewed the temptation for an anecdote when writing about the frighteningly sophisticated ways companies are snooping on employee computer use. The trend was important enough to be recognized directly. So Greg gave it to you like this:

Moving beyond merely monitoring employees' Internet use, many of the nation's largest companies are quietly assembling teams of computer investigators who specialize in covertly copying employees' hard drives and combing them for evidence of workplace wrongdoing.

These high-tech investigators employ tools and techniques that originally were devised for law enforcement to catch criminals but that are now spreading rapidly in the private sector at Microsoft, Disney, Boeing, Motorola, Fluor, Caterpillar and dozens of other major companies.

The development, little known outside the narrow community of corporate security experts, is sure to raise tensions over workplace privacy in an age when the lives of millions of workers are inextricably tied to their office computers.

Employers say that their rush into the field known as "computer forensics" is a matter of self-defense, that being able to retrieve computer evidence is essential to their ability to catch employees engaged in everything from spending too much time surfing the Internet to stealing company secrets.

One basic test is: Does the anecdote actually represent the greater truth of the story? Watch the problems you get into when that doesn't happen:

LAS VEGAS—This was the end of Martina Bauhaus' job interview for one of the most sought-after positions in town:

She put on black velvet high-cut briefs and a tight, low-cut bustier. When her name was called, she walked out of the fitting room to pose in front of a mirror—and half a dozen silent, staring men who measured her up like cattlemen at a livestock auction.

She didn't get the job. "Maybe," said the slender 28-year-old, "they didn't like my body in their outfit."

Know what the story's about yet? You'll have to keep reading.

Bauhaus, a law student with a master's degree in public administration, wasn't seeking a job as a model, but as a cocktail waitress at the new Suncoast Casino. Nobody asked her the

difference between a screwdriver and a rusty nail. She just had to have the right look.

Indeed, despite the supposed “Disneyfication” of Las Vegas, widespread unionization and the arrival of politically correct corporate casino owners, the image of the sexy cocktail waitress remains as vital here as a one-armed bandit.

Here comes the point:

But while young drink servers are still willing to don revealing outfits, there’s something of a rebellion afoot—literally: growing discontent over the use of high heels.

Led by a cocktail waitress named Cricket Martinez, members of an impromptu labor organization dubbed the Kiss My Foot Coalition are campaigning against shoes that they say can rack their bodies. After a rally in May, several casinos in Reno agreed to allow lower heels, and the loose-knit group now hopes to...

It’s not just that the story requires 168 words to get to the point (the 6th graf). It’s that most of those words (the first four graf) don’t lead you to the point. The story is about discontent over the use of high heels, but the anecdote doesn’t contain a single reference to footwear. Thus, the story virtually starts over at the 5th graf by building a contrast so that the 6th graf will have something to bounce off. In other words, we wind up with two leads: an anecdotal lead, and a contrast lead. That’s one lead too many.

Why not dump Martina Barhaus, exploit the central contrast—the (shortened) fifth and sixth graf--and start the story this way:

LAS VEGAS--Despite this city’s supposed “Disneyfication,” the image of the sexy cocktail waitress remains as vital here as a one-armed bandit.

But there’s something of a rebellion afoot—literally: growing discontent over the use of high heels.

Led by a cocktail waitress named Cricket Martinez...

Knowing when to cut the anecdote down to size

One indulgence that frequently sabotages anecdotal leads is the quote. By trying to give the anecdote a “voice,” the writer pushes down the graf that define the story. Consider this New York Times story from late September, with the questionable quote graf underlined:

Kevin Heebner, owner of a building supply store in Temple, Pa., got a call four years ago from his longtime stockbroker recommending an investment in short-term bonds. Assured the bonds were safe, Mr. Heebner invested \$100,000.

Three months later, Mr. Heebner received a stunning phone call. The broker told him the money he had put into the bonds was gone. The president of the broker’s firm, Old Naples Securities, had stolen it.

With his wife about to deliver their third child, Mr. Heebner, 36, reeled at the thought of a \$100,000 loss. Then he remembered with relief that his account was insured by the Securities Investor Protection Corporation, created by Congress in 1970 to protect investors’ brokerage accounts from just the sort of theft he had been a victim of.

“I knew that if they didn’t find the money from Old Naples Securities, I was insured through

S.I.P.C.,' Mr. Heebner recalled. The broker's 'business card and letterhead all had S.I.P.C. logos on them; I figured S.I.P.C. would cover it.'"

Mr. Heebner figured wrong. For more than four years, the corporation maintained he was entitled to nothing -- even though three federal courts ruled that S.I.P.C. should pay him \$87,000. Only last week, days after a reporter interviewed the lawyer representing the corporation about Mr. Heebner, did the investor receive a check in the amount of \$87,000.

"I never got the sense that S.I.P.C. was in any way trying to help my client," said William P. Thornton Jr., a lawyer at Stevens & Lee in Reading Pa., representing Mr. Heebner against the corporation. "They are very aggressive in attempting to prove that investors' claims do not come within certain legal definitions within the S.I.P.C. statute. And the loser is the investor."

At a time when millions of United States citizens have taken their money out of federally insured banks and put it into brokerage firms, the Securities Investor Protection Corporation's charge of protecting the investing public has never been more important. Officials of the S.I.P.C. defend the corporation's record and say they must be vigilant in protecting against invalid claims by investors.

But a close look at this little-understood organization shows that the safety net that investors believe the corporation offers is in fact full of holes.

Industry-financed but not government-backed, the corporation is a far cry from the agency on which it was loosely modeled, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, which protects bank customers against losses.

Created three decades ago...

You can see why the writer used the first quote: It allowed him to move seamlessly from the end of the quote to the third graf, playing off "figured" with "figured wrong." But was it worth it? It ate up 39 words, delaying us from understanding what the hell the story was about.

Even less functional was the second quote, which ate up 64 words to underscore a thesis that the writer had yet to introduce: the S.I.P.C. is full of holes. It took 351 words before you got to that proclamation graf—a trip made 29% longer by the two quotes.

Even without the quotes, the story used an unusual amount of length—248 words—to make its general point. If you think you don't lose a proportion of your readers by that kind of dawdling, you're kidding yourself. Make your point first, then let your characters talk.

It's not that quotes can't be used before the story gets to the point, but they tend to work better with a simpler story. Read this one from John Johnson, which also used parallel language to link quote and syntax. The difference was, John did it ("What's happening is...") to link the quote to the point of the story, not just to a passage in his anecdote:

SAN LUIS OBISPO--Amy Hutchcraft, 18, and her dormmates set up housekeeping in a lounge next to a laundry room. Ashleigh Boslet, a freshman from Pennsylvania, was crammed into a conference room with five others.

They were luckier than Birgitte Marthinsen, who arrived at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo two weeks ago from Norway and still had not found a place to live when school started Monday.

"My mother was crying on the phone last night," Marthinsen said as she dejectedly scanned the housing bulletin board in the campus union. "She said, 'What's happening to you?'"

What's happening is that students here and at other coastal universities in California have been caught in the jaws of a serious housing crunch. From Berkeley to Santa Barbara, stories of students employing desperate strategies to find places to sleep have become the stuff of local legend.

The crunch reflects the same conditions, if aggravated, that have afflicted the broader housing market across California. Too many people are chasing too few beds, especially in desirable coastal areas where slow and no-growth pledges have become as much a litmus test for political office as a hatred of taxes.

Words used to get to the point (the third graf): 93.

What a mid-career editing stint taught a reporter

John Johnson, whose work we were just admiring, emerged this year from a tour of duty as city editor of the Ventura County edition. He immediately began to crank out a series of artful front-page features that were notable for their graceful touch and economy of language. Were there any lessons from editing that paid off when he returned to the reporting ranks? Here's John's answer:

I always had two attitudes toward editors, both contradictory and both borne of ignorance. I suspect I'm not alone.

On the one hand, I tended to bridle at their authority. I didn't need anybody assigning me stories. I certainly didn't need anybody editing my stories when they were done. But this veneer hid a secret belief that my editors were right about me: Every time one suggested a change, sometimes even a small one, I fought while privately rehearsing my resignation speech. Of course, this is an exaggeration, but I think it illustrates something about the way reporters feel.

Becoming an editor helped me overcome these unhelpful ways of thinking. For one thing, I learned how hard the job is. That sword hanging over your head every day is a fearsome thing. Experienced editors have better metaphors for the pressure to fill a blank page, such as a thresher chasing you, but I always thought of it as kneeling down before the executioner and trying to talk him out of dropping the sword.

The job made me much more empathetic to those folks who stare at computer screens all day. I realized most of them were much better organized than I was. While a reporter worries about his story, an editor worries about stories, budgets, personnel and internal politics. It was dizzying.

I also learned they can be wrong. I made mistakes; I did a bad edit, or disciplined the wrong person. Knowing editors are human made me much more malleable in my dealings with them. If they are wrong sometimes, well, so am I.

But most importantly, I got to read raw copy, lots of it, every day. Going through that focused me on the essentials of communication. I started watching my reactions, and taking note when I



began to feel impatient if the writer took too long to get to the point. I found myself admiring word play, even while I was trimming it because the verbal gymnastics overwhelmed the story. And I resolved that if and when I went back to writing I would remember the things that bothered me in other people's writing and try to correct them in mine.

I think I write tighter now, and get to the point faster. I also respect editors more, I think, because I realize that we all fail sometimes and are wrong sometimes. (I don't mean about facts. I still worry nights over them. In fact, I think the truly biggest difference between editing and writing is that when you are an editor your days are hard; when you are a writer, your nights are hard.)

Every so often, I'd like to do an editing stint to reinforce the lessons I learned. I don't know if the experience would be good for every reporter; maybe just the thick ones. All I can say is, it was good for me.

When the headline  
eats the story

District Attorney-elect Steve Cooley's first pledge last week was to criminalize "headline plagiarism," in which the headline writer swipes the language or the sensibility of the lead, creating a flattened sensation when the reader gets to the lead, engendering an "I-already-know-this" reaction and encouraging the reader to quit and move on to another story.

Exhibit A was a story that began with a fairly clever approach, playing off our presidential election stalemate:

America finally welcomed a president-elect Thursday night—one who sports a mustache and wears size 12 cowboy boots.

Vicente Fox, elected president of Mexico on July 2, flew in to address a banquet in Los Angeles of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund...

The headline above it said:

L.A. Welcomes  
Next President  
—of Mexico

"This," Cooley said, "will not continue on my watch."

(Well, you can't blame a guy for dreaming.)

Cliché of the month

The continual use of "roller coaster" in the days after the election was understandable, but we'll present them here as a reminder of a minor peril of a huge running story:

A-1 Wednesday: King's friend, Tish Owen, 49, echoed her sentiments. "It feels like a big roller coaster," Owen said. "But it ain't over till it's over."

Sidebar, Wednesday: The other networks quickly fell into line with that prediction as well as Associated Press and Web pages, including the site for the Miami Herald.

But the roller-coaster was just getting underway.

A-1, Thursday: After Tuesday night's election roller coaster, there were few moments Wednesday to match the surge of emotions that sent partisan hopes soaring, then plunging.

Sidebar, Thursday: Well into the morning Wednesday, tortured political junkies rode a roller-coaster of dashed and revived expectations.

Business headline, Friday: Stocks Roller-Coaster as Gore Challenges Vote

To be sure, he worked hard for his 15 minutes of fame

The winner of the most-cliches-in-a-50-word-lede is James Bates, who beat out a large field of (two other) entrants with this gem, which crammed 12 cliches (underlined), including quotes, into 54 words:

When Bob Baker decided to give the speech of his life on seismic shifts in the new economy, he worked 24/7.

“It’s about convergence, substance over style, crushing defeats and walking the walk,” the spinmeister said, leaning back in his chair.

Now the landscape has changed dramatically and leveled the playing field, analysts say.

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