Borrow strategies that journalists
use to effectively tell a story.

Train Like the News

BY HANK WALLACE

"Lead with the future—not background" is the most important of six jour-
nalism skills that will transform how you train. Like reporters at their
best, you'll earn your learners' attention, comprehension, and respect.
You'll also give your learners solid training value from the first moment of each
class. Other journalism strategies that translate well in training are to defer
housekeeping, integrate your big idea and the big picture, explain unfamiliar
terms, animate numbers, and avoid "uptalk."

Lead with the future, not background

Suppose you're a trainer at an engineering company. Engage your learners in the first six seconds by leading with what they'll gain from your course: "You'll learn today how to make this drone fly like an eagle, and four other airborne creatures." After that, there's plenty of time for the background that would be a conventional lecture lead. For instance: "Years ago, before I ever heard of mass and velocity, I noticed a bird changing course much faster than a plane."

By leading with the future, you emulate about two-thirds of news headlines. As I type this, TD.org is leading with the future: "Preparing for What's Next: How Managers Can Unlock Strategic Thinking." Only after that headline, sensibly, does the writer give us background: "We have come a long way from the old analogy that an organization is like a bicycle: one executive steers while everyone else pedals as fast as they can."

> LEAD WITH YOUR INSTRUCTIONAL BEST, STARTING WITHIN A SECOND OF THE SCHEDULED START TIME, LIKE A NEWS ANCHOR.

Lead with enlightenment, not housekeeping

Emulate the way a CBS news anchor, true to his job title, leads with news rather than with housekeeping items. In the intro to one of his shows, he packs four headlines into the first 30 seconds—the first 72 words. He starts the broadcast by saying, "Severe weather threatens millions: tornado warnings in the Midwest, snow in the Rockies." Then, a video appears of Donald Trump saying, "I don't have to hear from this man, believe me." After that, the anchor says: "Republicans spar over Donald Trump's plan to deport millions of illegal immigrants. Two fantasy-sports websites argue the call after being flagged for illegal gambling. And these veterans found new purpose thanks to a fallen comrade," which introduces a video.

Only after the anchor delivers those headlines does the announcer say, "This is the CBS *Evening News* with Scott Pelley," and the anchor says, "Good evening. Scott is on assignment tonight. I'm Charlie Rose."

Similarly, suppose you're substituting for a fellow trainer. Start strong: Lead with one or two enlightening, engaging sentences. After that, there's plenty of time for the background with which a substitute conventionally leads. For example, "Hi. I'm Pat Smith. I know you were expecting Kim Jones. But Kim is doing an emergency consultation and asked that I substitute today—and sent me the syllabus, so I have a good idea of what you've been covering."

Lead with your instructional best, starting within a second of the scheduled start time, like a news anchor. Don't just get to the point; start at the point. You'll motivate your learners to show up for your course on time, eager to participate and take notes.

Lead with both 'forest' and 'tree'

Suppose you're training employees about computer graphics. Lead with, "You'll see how Renaissance artists use perspective, and four other techniques, to engage our eyes" or "You'll see how Renaissance artists use five techniques—including perspective—to engage your eyes." Either of those two leads beats, "You'll see how Renaissance artists use perspective to engage our eyes" (should be quantitatively stronger), "You'll see how Renaissance artists use five techniques to engage our eyes" (should be qualitatively stronger), or reciting all five main headings from your syllabus (would dilute your strongest heading).

By leading with both the "forest" and the main "tree," you emulate a pair of *Wall Street Journal* headlines: "[Bank of America] Weighs Sale, Other Options for Trading Desk" and "Citi Weighs Its Options, Including Firm's Sale."

You also apply, to training, business's 80/20 rule, known as the Pareto principle: If you give your learners five

skills, 80 percent of the total value resides in just one of those skills.

Preempt 'Huh?'

Define any unfamiliar term, of course—in helpful sequence.

On its front page, the *New York Times* buttressed a startling astrophysics finding (and the cachet of a 12-day scoop) by stating the prestigious nature of a publication before stating its unfamiliar title: "It is to be published on Aug. 27 in the field's most prestigious journal, *Physical Review Letters.*" The *Times'* sequence informs readers immediately. Contrast a sequence that impairs all too many training classes— unfamiliar name, then description: "*Physical Review Letters,* the field's most prestigious journal."

Deploy raw numbers and ratios

When your training topic entails quantitative data, the raw numbers are often all you need. But sometimes you can enlighten your learners more by pulling a striking ratio from the data. Sometimes cite both, as the CBS *Evening News* once did: "Thirty-five trillion gallons of rain has fallen in Texas this month—enough to cover the nation's second largest state in eight inches of water." (That's indeed a ratio: eight cubic inches of water per square inch of ground.)

Remember those computer-graphics learners? Assign them to depict that raw number of gallons: 35 trillion. Or crunch the raw numbers to focus government-relations learners: "Today we'll discuss what three political theorists would each advise federal, state, and local governments, and individual Texans to do about this: On average, eight cubic inches of rain have fallen on each square inch of Texas in a month."

Suppose you're training employees about international business.

> **SOMETIMES YOU CAN ENLIGHTEN YOUR LEARNERS MORE BY PULLING A STRIKING RATIO FROM THE DATA.**

How would you animate the following numbers from a *New York Times* article about General Motors's spending to revive its European brands? "The company said it now will pitch in €1.9 billion, or $2.6 billion … G.M. had previously said it would provide €600 million." Some hints: Deploy a ratio and, of course, lead with the future. Here's the *Times* headline: "G.M. to Triple Investment in European Turnaround."

The "triple" in the *Times* headline does four jobs:

- It reports that the quantity is to change. By contrast, your learners would get no such context were the headline, "G.M. to Invest $2.6 Billion in European Turnaround."
- It tells us the direction of the change (up, in this case).
- It tells us the magnitude of the change—in the helpful form of a ratio. "Triple" does the math for us.
- It finesses the euros-to-dollars currency conversion.

Avoid 'uptalk'

Say—don't ask. Project confidence like a TV reporter. Avoid voicing a statement as if it were a question: "You'll learn today? How to make this drone? Fly like an eagle?" Rather, project confidence in your expertise, and enthusiasm for your learners: "You'll learn today how to make this drone fly like an eagle."

■ **Hank Wallace**, a Columbia Law School graduate who wrote the Federal Communications Commission's plain-language newsletter, leads the seminar "Write & Speak Like the News"; -- hankwallace@wsln.com.
hank@hankwallace.com

td
talent development

SUBSCRIBE TODAY!