

## TV News Style Notes

All staff who contribute to TV News bulletins should be familiar with this section of the Style Guide.

The state-based composite TV News bulletins have operated on an informal approach of containing one-third international news, one-third national and one-third state. This will vary from day to day, and from state to state, but it is a good guideline that has been successful.

Banners/titles/headlines should be kept short and sharp, but they must still be sentences – not newspaper-style headlines without verbs.

In stories, don't sacrifice sense for the sake of brevity by using very short actuality grabs. Talent should be on camera long enough for their visual and verbal presence to be properly absorbed. Usually, that means more than the five-second minimum required for supering purposes.

One or two words from talent, or a linking one-line of script, can be an effective technique in helping to tell a story – but the technique requires skilled scripting and editing.

It is important to remember that what works in terms of audio or visuals in the ideal viewing conditions of the edit suite might not survive the same test in lounge room conditions.

Television News links should be closer to 15 seconds than 30.

RVOs (reader voice overs) should never start with a one-line (reader to camera) intro, leading into actuality or NATSOT (natural sound on tape). The first vision in an RVO must be covered with an establishing paragraph of script.

Use opportunities to create a flow between stories (“Returning overseas”; “As the state fights that flu outbreak, there’s been a breakthrough in treatment of a very different ailment”; “From the office to the school playground”; “Continuing with business”). They can give an organic quality to the bulletin, but make sure they can be carried off by the presenter and are not contrived or become too formulaic. Also be careful of making links between stories that have inappropriate legal or editorial implications.

Closing vision (the “closer”) should be chosen carefully. There is a tendency to use the most dramatic story of the day, which can involve violence or disaster vision. This is not always desirable without the context of the script that went with the vision earlier in the bulletin.

Bulletin producers must audition (or “shotlist”) stories before broadcast, except in exceptional circumstances. This should be regarded as a compulsory requirement for locally-produced stories, with particular emphasis on stories being syndicated for network use. It may not always be practical for state producers to view all stories from other states before they go to air, but it is desirable for quality and suitability purposes.

Some other key points about TV News are listed below.

### **actuality**

Allow a story to breathe by bringing up natural sound. But actuality in the form of an interview grab should never be treated as atmosphere: it’s there to convey information, and needs to satisfy the usual requirements of clarity and sense.

Rapid inter-cutting of actuality of short duration works only in rare cases. Grabs under five seconds are too short to super and the speaker needs to be identified in the link or voiceover.

Avoid file sound as actuality, as it may falsify an event (added police sirens, for example).

### **attribution**

Attribute non-ABC material, but do it as subtly as possible. If, for instance, we use a grab from one of the commercial Sunday political programs, it will generally have the logo of the channel on it. In these cases, there is no need for any further attribution.

### **bugs**

News pictures, including interviews, which are exclusive to the ABC and which we want to protect should carry a “bug” that identifies the program, together with the ABC logo. If the bug is not rendered onto the original tapes, then the library should keep a record that the bug is to be used whenever the material is rebroadcast, at least while exclusivity needs to be protected.

### **bullet points**

When using a still page with revealed points, the fewer words used the better. Avoid jargon and any phrasing that needs further explanation.

The on-screen text must match the voiceover. Paraphrasing visible text is confusing.

## **deadlines**

The deadline for stories required for network use is **not** one minute to bulletin time. And don't plan solely in terms of your local outlet – allow time for syndication. Bear in mind other states and other time zones.

## **durations**

Ultimately, the bulletin producer decides how long a story should be. However don't sacrifice sense for brevity and leave your story hanging, lacking essential information. Normally, TV news packages should aim for a duration of 1:15 to 1:45 – although there is still a place for longer stories, whether they are lead stories or packages for use later in the bulletin. Producers should mix-and-match, to balance their bulletins.

## **file pictures**

In general, we should use the "File" super only when leaving it out could lead to a misunderstanding. However, file pictures of a particular incident (especially images of public disorder or disasters) must be identified with a "File" super or a super that gives the place and date. Generic overlay is not usually given a "File" super.

In television rolling coverage, use the super "Earlier" over vision recorded earlier, when going back and forth between live and recorded images, or when confusion might arise.

## **flags**

We need to be sensitive about the use of national flags in graphics. Flags overlying each other denote domination or surrender, which may be inappropriate. Generally, if we are using more than one flag, they need to be given equal space and importance.

## **graphics**

Television news graphics may be simple or static, complex or moving, but they have one essential purpose: to illustrate a news point. If the graphic is confused, too complex, too wordy or illegible, it will fail in its purpose. It's not an art form, but a news technique.

Used appropriately, they can have great impact and help illustrate stories that are picture-poor. They should enhance the script and provide information that's easy to absorb.

As you plan your story, look for opportunities to incorporate a graphic sequence – and don't think just of lists. Graphics can be the best way to explain the physical relationships between elements of a story. The worst graphics are either too complicated or sit there for too long, doing nothing.

Having thought about the possible graphics, talk to the producer or director before you go out on a story. If possible, write that element of your script before you leave the office. Keep it simple. Give the graphics as much time as possible.

Ideally, write out your graphic request with script in the 7pm stories area of iNews with suggested background, the reporter's name and a contact number. You should also include the story slug and details, such as whether the graphic is going into the intro or the package.

We have the capacity to do still and moving graphics, but anything complex requires a lot of notice. For moving graphics that can be achieved more quickly, talk to a director about taking graphic elements and moving them through manipulation in the studio.

### **headline straps**

We use these on the MCU of the newsreader. They should always be two words on a bottom of frame bar on the left third of the screen. Use upper case for the first word; the second word takes a capital only if it's a proper noun. These straps should never be cryptic. They need to be the barest essence of the story reduced to two words. Strong nouns and adjectives generally work better than verbs. For example: "Tax review" not "Taxes reviewed", "Terror arrest" not "Terrorist arrested". Be alert for stories (angles) changing after the strap has been written. Watch spelling as mistakes here are very obvious. A producer should check supers and headline straps in the last 15 minutes before the bulletin goes to air.

### **intros**

The link or intro is the audience's first pass at a story. The audience will hear it once and must understand it the first time. The link should introduce the story in a clear and concise way, but must never simply repeat the information or turn- of-phrase in the first lines of the voiceover or script.

### **location maps**

We use these in introductions to locate foreign correspondents when they are off base. They will always have a shot of the correspondent and a map indicating where they are. When used in an intro we don't need a reporter super within the story. They can also be used as a phoner graphic.

## **maps**

Maps within stories can be very effective but they need to move or they need to change. They also need to be as simple as possible. Use the fewest elements possible that can tell the story. Show the nearest capital city/major town as a reference point but do not show other places that aren't directly relevant to the story. Reveal locations as they are named to help focus attention. If possible, use appropriate symbols with locations, such as flames to indicate fires, and nuclear symbols for radiation leaks. If you are trying to describe movement or a journey, connect the places with graphic elements such as lines or arrows and reveal the locations. Again, early preparation is best. If necessary, leave a guide track so graphics and editors can get the timing right. If you are describing an unfamiliar location, use an inset. Take advantage of the wide-screen format and think about incorporating a graphic element that further enhances the image you're trying to convey.

## **news flashes**

Refer up for access to the network.

Our aim is to react quickly, but never put a report to air without confirming the facts. As soon as a breaking story has been confirmed, put a brief version on ABCWIRE so everyone can use it.

The procedure for getting News flashes to air on the various networks is explained in the iNews cue: Disaster - News Flash.

When selecting images and sounds for a news flash, give consideration to the likely composition of the audience.

## **plasmas**

The plasma graphic is used for variety and emphasis. They need to be simple and bold. A single head can work but more than one takes away from the impact. Generally, two words should be enough but the look should be balanced. Alliteration can work as long as it's not too contrived or corny. Upper word should be in upper case, the lower in title case. The plasmas can also be used to indicate a change of direction, such as the first foreign story, a shift back to local, the first sports story and so on. They should be distributed evenly through the bulletin. Framing should be carefully done so the presenter's right shoulder is just over the plasma and not squeezed over to the right of screen.

## **quotes**

Always try to have a still of the person being quoted. It should sit top left next to a heading for the story. The name and the descriptor should be under the photo, with the name in upper case and the descriptor in title case. Quotes needs to be in quotation marks. If the quote comes from the middle of a sentence in the original text, begin the quote with an ellipse ( . . . ) and start the quote in lower case. If it is abridged, use an ellipse where the missing words are. In general, the voice-over should follow the quote exactly. Confusion occurs when the ear hears something other than what the eye is seeing.

For audio grabs, the same principles apply as for quotes but generally we'll use a bigger picture, possibly with a map if that helps explain why we can get only audio. Again, the talent name should be in upper case, the descriptor in title case. If audio comes from an ABC program, spell out the program in full, such as "ABC Radio - The World Today".

### **sign-offs**

In Television News bulletins, sign-offs are required. Usually, producers should use the reporter's name in the link only for international stories or for an ABC exclusive or major news event. The usual sign-off form is: "Mary Manners, ABC News, Adelaide".

If the story uses elements from more than one source or is not location specific, the form is: "Mary Manners, ABC News". (Canberra is an exception to this rule.)

Avoid ending a story with a grab, but if that works best, drop the sign-off. A piece-to-camera used at the end of a story should employ a sign-off, but stories ending with a strong natural sound element do not require a sign-off.

Sports stories written off the satellite should not give a location in the sign-off. But give a location in sports stories involving original reportage.

When a segue is employed, the first story or segment should not have a sign-off.

### **supers**

Supers are text information for inclusion on screen in a television story at the time of broadcast. Super details should be entered into iNews with the reporter's link.

All stories require a location, a date or a "File" super, unless the story begins with generic file vision or quickly moves between locations:

MELBOURNE [Upper case]  
Jane Doe [Upper and lower case]  
Reporting [Upper and lower case]  
(IMMED)

If the reporter was not at the location, the location super appears immediately and the reporter's name appears in a separate super, as soon as possible afterwards:

SYDNEY  
(IMMED)

Michael Brown  
Reporting  
(SOONEST)

The same separation of supers applies if a story begins with natural sound. Give the location super immediately and the reporter's name once the narration begins.

A "File" super is not necessary for generic images, where viewers are unlikely to be confused.

If a story begins with file tape, and needs to be identified as such, super:

File                      or              November 18  
(IMMED)                                      (IMMED)

Specifying the date is often preferable (for recent events, the best form is "Last Saturday"). Even if there is a script reference to the date of a historic event, specific occasion or grab, a super of the date should be included.

Give the year only if the date does not refer to the current year. Be careful when moving within a story between current and old images of a similar sort (for example, parliamentary debate, a leaders' summit, a demonstration, a court appearance). It may be appropriate to identify the current vision with a "Today" super if a lot of file vision surrounds it.

Super the reporter's name "soonest", even when black-and-white vision or still pictures are in use. Exceptions will be if the super might obscure important vision, or if it would appear across a photo of a person.

Supers of interviewees must give the name on the top line, the designation on the next line, and the super time below that:

John Smith (Upper and lower case)

VETERANS ASSOCIATION (Upper case only)  
(0.15)

Brief grabs should be flagged:

(0.43 - 0.48)  
\*\*\*QUICK\*\*\*

Grabs of less than five seconds are too short to super. Indicate them on the script. Likewise, indicate any cutaways that might clash with a super:

(0.43 - 0.48)  
\*\*\*AFTER C/WAY\*\*\*

For talent interviewed somewhere other than the story location, give the new location:

DARWIN  
Suzanne White  
PUBLIC PROSECUTOR  
(0.52)

Supers are all bottom of frame. There are potentially three different types. A single line will be justified right and will be used for locations, file tape or a date. Locations will be in title case in the form of "Leppington, NSW," or "Wangaratta, Vic".

Date supers should be in the form of "June 2005" or "June 23 2005" if the exact date is important. "Last month", "Last September" or "Last Friday" can also be very useful date supers when trying to place something at a specific time in the past.

Two-line supers are for the talent. They will be justified left on a bar about two thirds across towards the left of screen. The top line will always be in title case. The descriptor line will be in lower case. The second word will take a capital only when it is a proper noun, for example, "Airline pilot", "Managing Director", "Attorney-General", "Australian captain".

When describing talent, keep it simple. Anything that requires the viewer to think about the super will be distracting them from the main message. "Union official" is almost always better than "CFMEU". Functions are usually better than organisations. Consider, for example, using "Share analyst" rather than "Goldman Sachs", "Marine biologist" rather than "Great Barrier Reef Marine Authority".



There are also three-line supers when you want to combine location and talent or a date and talent.

Use acronyms only when completely familiar (e.g. "ACTU", "ASIO"), and don't use full stops between the letters.

Abbreviated words take a full stop only when the last letter of the abbreviation is not the last letter of the word: "Sen." for senator but "Snr" for senior.

In general, avoid ranks for police and armed forces. Use instead:

Joe Smith  
NSW POLICE

Angus Houston  
CHIEF OF DEFENCE FORCE

### **transcripts**

Provide an accurate transcript of interview grabs, voice reports and pieces-to-camera. Producers need transcripts to sub a new version of a story and make editorial assessments when compiling bulletins. Online requires transcripts to prepare its stories, including to obtain direct quotes. "In" and "out" words are sufficient if a story is being prepared close to bulletin time, but it is the reporter's responsibility to get the transcript into iNews as soon as possible.