

Communication 4312 – Background

In writing, background can be awfully compelling. The two main problems with background are these: the writer will tend to include background that doesn't belong in the story, or will put background in the wrong place.

The two best examples of this are “a native of” and age. However, other examples abound. What you need to avoid is thinking and writing in clichés. You don't want the writing to sound forced.

This doesn't mean you shouldn't use background. What it means is that you have to handle it carefully. That begins in preparation, continues through the interview and comes to fruition at the time of writing.

Neither does this mean that you shouldn't find out everything you can about a person. That's the way you learn who the person is. That's the way you sort through the information and come up with pertinent background.

What we are looking for is background that supports the thesis, the angle, the approach to the story. In other words, background that is relevant to the story. Remember the basic question: what's the story about?

The use of background will vary according to the depth and length of the story. Suppose you are doing a story on the new chair of a particular department on campus. The person's background is important. But, not all of it. Say she was in the Girl Scouts. Say she represented Texas at Girls' Nation. That's awfully interesting, but it's not relevant to the situation.

What is relevant? The kind of background the person has that qualifies her for this job. Did she work in industry? Has she been involved in research related to this academic area? However, if she went to the University of Houston, that's worth mentioning. Or if she's a native of the Czech Republic. That would be worth mentioning.

The point is that you must constantly evaluate background to determine to what extent it is worth including or excluding. The older the person you are dealing with the more background you will have to evaluate.

This can change when we get to longer stories, but that can wait for now.

■ David McHam