

Communication 4312 – A History of Style

Once upon a time in a land far away, news accounts were sent over telegraph lines. The highlight of this period came during the Civil War. The telegraph lines were operated by the military. They were unreliable. As a result, writers began putting the most important facts at the beginning of the story. As time went by, this was to become the basic story format of the cooperative news agencies. The name given to that is the inverted pyramid.

The telegraph operated on the dots and dashes system. Eventually the telegraph gave way to Teletype machines that would print out accounts in lines and in paragraphs. For the longest time, these accounts were printed in all capital letters. As a result, every story had to be edited in a local newspaper. As a result, each newspaper – and magazine – developed its own style.

During World War II the government came up with a system of perforated tape to send messages over the Teletype. This speeded up the process. Several operators could work on tapes at the same time and that kept the Teletype machines running constantly.

After World War II, private companies began adapting that system to the operation of Linotype machines. The Linotype machine had been introduced in the 1880s. Over time, all body type and some headline type was set on the Linotype and Intertype machines. A Ludlow machine set headlines larger than a certain point size – usually 36 point. Still, many smaller newspapers set headlines with foundry type.

By the early 1950s, Linotype and Intertype machines were equipped with attachments that allowed the machines to read the perforated tapes. Thereafter, stories could be sent by the wire services in two forms – justified and edited hard copy and an accompanying perforated tape. The tapes could be fed directly into the typesetting machines.

This was the end for local style. Making changes in the type was cumbersome and time-consuming -- although some newspapers tried it for a while. The wire services – AP, UP and INS – got together and came out with an agreed upon national or universal style. Local newspapers conformed to that style.

Even with a unified style, news organizations still have a need for a local style and/or stylebook as a way of handling stories. And sometimes the local style overrides the universal style. Examples abound.

The best advice I can give you about going to work somewhere is this: Learn the style. Don't complain about it. Don't tell them that you did it differently somewhere else. Matters of style aren't topics for debate.

■ David McHam