

Script: Sports Reporting and Writing
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Sports coverage is an important part of student media. It's followed closely by the school and community – and in some cases colleges looking to recruit top athletes. Because it's so important, there are some special considerations to make when you're on the sports beat.

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For instance, it is really important that you know the sport – or sports – you're tasked with covering. So, if you don't understand the rules of lacrosse, you need to familiarize yourself with them before going out to cover a lacrosse game. Some student newsrooms keep "cheat sheets" on hand that can help a reporter brush up on the rules before going out to cover a game.

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You need to know who the people are that you're covering. Who runs the 100-meter hurdles for your girls track team? If you're covering the regional track meet, you're going to need to know that. You'll also need to know who the track coach is. Make sure you know how to properly spell and pronounce their names, too.

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And, make sure you know the stats. What's the soccer team's record heading into the game? How many assists does the forward have this season? How many saves does the starting goalie have? Could any school or conference records be broken? This is all very important information to have handy.

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There are three types of sports stories. Game stories...

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...preview stories...

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...and feature stories.

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... and sports columns. I'll explain the purpose of each of them.

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A game story is just what it sounds like... it is a story that summarizes a game or a match. It's the most predictable sports story you'll write. As you get started – think about what you learned about the inverted pyramid.

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The lede will usually include the basics... who won? Who lost? What was the score?

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And, then you'll have your nut graf... what happened that was most important. Here you'll identify the game's defining moments – maybe a buzzer beating basket or a penalty or foul that changed the game's whole momentum.

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That'll follow with a quote from a player or coach. This is where you're likely to encounter cliches – so ask questions that will get you emotional responses... Maybe ask things like “what was going through your mind when that happened?” Or, “When did you know that you were going to win this one?” And, don't just ask questions of the winners... your readers want to hear from the losing team, too.

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You'll end your game story with a look ahead at what's next for the team. How might the outcome of this game affect playoff seedings? When is the next game? Who do they play?

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This makes for a logical place to talk about the preview story. Which does exactly what it sounds like – it previews an upcoming game.

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This is a time to look at how the two teams match-up. Who might be stronger on offense... or defense? Which team has more speed – and what does the other need to do to counteract that? Or what kinds of strategies might players or teams need to use to come out ahead?

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What makes this game special? Could a championship be on the line? Might someone set a scoring record? Maybe this is the first time teams are playing each other in 20 years? Or, they're long-time rivals and one of the teams is looking to avenge a loss from the last time they met.

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Sports feature stories enhance your game coverage by adding depth.

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They are character-driven... with the athletes and coaches as your characters.

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We take them off the field – or court – and tell the stories of who they are, what makes them interesting... what makes them someone you think other people should know.

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Sometimes it may have a lot to do with their sport, sometimes it might not have anything to do with it at all. Here are some examples of possible feature story ideas:

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Injuries are common among high school athletes. Maybe she came down hard and tore her ACL, ending her season. Talk to her, see if she'd let you follow her journey through surgery and rehab on that knee as she works to come back for next year. This could be a great series that maybe you could run monthly, with updates on her progress, her struggles and her triumphs.

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Sports are often a family affair. Do you have a family in your school with more than one member on the team? Consider a profile of those brothers or sisters.

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Maybe there's someone in your school training for the Olympics. They may or may not play a sport at school – because injury could be a real concern. Even if they're not on your school team, you could very well write one – or more – feature stories about their journey.

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Maybe your star wide receiver also has the highest grade point average in the senior class. How do they manage their time? When do they practice, when do they study? What unique pressures do they feel to stay on top – in both academics and athletics?

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For a pre-season feature, consider following a freshman through their first tryout. What are they thinking and feeling through the process? Are they scared? Nervous? Confident? Will they make the team? It could be a compelling read.

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Team managers can be the unsung heroes. Consider doing a personality profile on the person who keeps up with equipment, uniforms, etc.

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Here's an idea for another series: what if you were to write about each team's pre-game rituals? Do they have a team meal or all wear the same color socks for good luck? You could do this with the football team, tennis team, basketball team, track team... you get the idea.

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Sports features are just like any other feature story – in that they focus on *people*, and what makes them special. If you want to learn more about feature writing, I recommend our learning module from my colleague, Heather Lamb.

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Finally, our fourth example of a sports story, the sports column. Having a sports column can be a great addition to your student publication.

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Columns allow you to introduce opinion and commentary – on how a team is playing, how a specific athlete is performing, and so on.

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Your sports columnist can write about your school's teams or athletes – but they can also broaden the scope, including college, amateur, Olympic, and professional teams.

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Whatever you do, make sure it's clearly labeled as an opinion piece for transparency sake. My colleague, Laura Johnston, has another lesson for you on opinion and column writing, if this is something you'd like to learn more about.

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When you're choosing what to cover keep this in mind: Sure, there are some sports that will attract more attention or interest than others. But, it's the job of the student press to cover them all. That means covering boys teams and girls teams equally. If your school has a badminton or bowling team – that should get as much coverage as the football or basketball teams.

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Once you sit down to write – make sure that you're carefully considering your word choice. Use active verbs. This will keep your story moving with the same pacing and excitement as the event itself. Avoid using jargon... so, for instance, you're not going to refer to the basketball team as roundballers, the wrestlers as grapplers or the girls swimmers as mermaids. And, avoid clichés. An example of what I mean by that? "It was a team effort," or "they put points on the board." Phrases like that are overused and don't really convey what happened.

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The Associated Press Stylebook has an entire section devoted to sports coverage. It helps journalists standardize how they write. For instance, scores

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scores are always written as numerals, high score – hyphen – low score.

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So, let's say the Ravens played the Comets and beat them, 62 to 57. The score would read 62-57.

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Team records don't always go high to low.

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Instead, it's wins followed by losses followed by ties – when the sport has ties.

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So, let's say our Ravens aren't so good, and have only won five of their 13 games this season, we'd write their record as 5 hyphen 8.

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The stylebook also has sections on how to list position players, times, etc.

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You may so want to consider writing a local style guide, with information on how to abbreviate things specific to your region such as schools, tournaments, conferences and so on.

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Each of the techniques we've talked about so far work well for your main publication platforms... but sports are nearly continuous. How do you keep reporting between issues or newscasts? Using social media sites such as Twitter, Instagram, Vine and Facebook – of course!

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You can use Twitter during a game... tweet about a big play, when someone scores, a game's decisive moments, and so on. Most high school sporting events aren't on TV or radio. This is the next best thing to a live broadcast.

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Twitter can be a great way to report on your school's competition, too. Follow reporters from other school publications – and retweet their reports, too. Fans of your school's teams will want to know how rivals are faring in their game, especially come state tournament time.

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Look for tweets from athletes at your school. Are they tweeting about something that happened at practice? Or what they felt or thought following the big win? Retweet those, share those with *your* followers, too.

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And, when your stories go to publication – remind your Twitter followers of that, too. If your publication is online, include a link using a URL shortener such as Bit.ly. If you're print-only, remind students to pick up a copy of the paper.

Slide 49:

You can use Vine and Instagram to share photos and video from the game. Vine records and archives video in six second clips, while Instagram's videos are 15 seconds.

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Make sure you have your phone handy – and shoot the big plays that people might want to go back and watch again and again.

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Or, maybe use Vine or Instagram’s video feature to record fun moments – fans on the sidelines, cheerleaders’ reactions... the things that create a full experience for your readers.

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Facebook will be your best social media platform *after* the game. That’s because you can share your story...

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...and encourage people to add their thoughts on the game, to provide their own analysis... and to share it with *their* Facebook friends. This increases *your* story’s reach.

Slide 54:

...and in the process, you can also ask fans to contribute their photos or videos from the game.

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None of this matters if you can’t get into the game. Most schools sell ticket to sporting events – as a way to raise money to pay for the athletic programs, uniforms, equipment and the like.

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But, as you’ve learned in the past, ethical journalists don’t pay for access to news – or sports – events.

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Having a press pass – or credential – should get you into these events for free.

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If your publication doesn’t already issue press passes to staffers, you talk to your adviser about issuing something that identifies you as a journalist. They can be very simple... You can either issue them for a full-school year or on an assignment-by-assignment basis.

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Here are two examples of press passes issued to me when I was a high school student reporting on high school sports. As you can see, they’re pretty simple... they have my name, the name of my newspaper and my editors’ names – so if anyone had a question as to my purpose, they knew who to contact.

Slide 60:

It can be very overwhelming – the first time you step foot in a press box. Remember, you're there to work... you're not a fan, not in this moment, at least. There's an old saying "there's no cheering in the press box." So, don't. Maintain your objectivity. And, like every other reporter around you, look for the game's decisive moments and begin your real-time reporting.