

Media Making: Choosing Content

How do you choose the right subject for your media project? Most major science stories fall into one of the five broad categories below. Note that the category of your story isn't the same as the purpose of your story. Any category can be made to inform, entertain and/or persuade an audience. It can also be developed for political, commercial, educational, artistic, moral and/or other purposes.

Also below are four questions that journalists try to answer as they develop their stories. Answer each one as you develop your story. While your story will be factually correct, of course, you should also think about what makes it compelling. Ultimately, you will tell a better story if you care about the subject and find it interesting.

STORY TYPES

1. Breaking News

This term refers to an important event that is happening now. Often this type of story requires the reporter to be on location, at the scene of the story as it unfolds.

- For example, when a bridge collapsed in Minneapolis, it was national news. QUEST wasn't able to go to Minnesota to report on it firsthand, but our radio reporters interrupted their projects to report on bridge safety in the San Francisco Bay Area. Listen to the QUEST radio report "Science of Bridge Safety."
<http://science.kqed.org/quest/audio/science-of-bridge-safety/>

2. Counterintuitive

These stories run counter to or opposite of what people might assume to be true.

- For example, the water in San Francisco Bay is getting cleaner, and cleaner water isn't necessarily better. Listen to the QUEST radio report "The Changing Bay."
<http://science.kqed.org/quest/audio/the-changing-bay/>

3. Surprising

This type of story is memorable and unexpected. Its "wow" factor makes people stop and take notice. While the audience may not be directly affected, the story is interesting enough to capture attention.

- For example, how do staff members at the Monterey Bay Aquarium clean tanks that are filled with dangerous animals? Watch the QUEST Science on the SPOT story "Swimming with Sharks."
<http://science.kqed.org/quest/video/science-on-the-spot-swimming-with-sharks/>

4. Trends

For these stories, reporters assemble facts and find patterns that can help people understand their world in a larger context.

- For example, the rates of childhood asthma in the United States rose 160 percent from 1980 to 1994 and have remained high ever since, making this chronic lung illness the country's third most common pediatric disease. Watch the QUEST television story "Asthma: What Brought on the Epidemic?"
<http://science.kqed.org/quest/video/asthma-what-brought-on-the-epidemic/>

5. Explanatory

These stories explain concepts in order to help the audience better understand a topic. They're like interesting media versions of textbooks. This is probably the type of story that you'll most often create for science education assignments.

- For example, we often hear about GMOs, but what are genetically engineered crops and how do they affect our lives? Watch the QUEST television story “Next Meal: Engineering Food.” <http://science.kqed.org/quest/video/next-meal-engineering-food/>

QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR STORY

Why does my community care?

Your story should be important to your audience and be presented in a meaningful context. A good story doesn't just say that hepatitis C causes liver damage and cancer. It also explains how new potential cures give hope to the estimated four million Americans with the disease. Watch the QUEST television story “Hepatitis C: The Silent Epidemic.” <http://www.kqed.org/quest/television/hepatitis-c-the-silent-epidemic>

Can I explain this story in one sentence?

Explaining a story clearly in one sentence isn't easy! You must focus on your main idea. You could write a six-page paper on restoring San Francisco Bay's wetlands, but to sell a short media piece, a journalist needs to boil it down to “San Francisco Bay has shrunk by one third due to the destruction of wetlands over the past century. Now thousands of wetland acres from Napa to San Jose are being restored to bring back birds, fish and public recreation.” Watch the QUEST television story “Wetlands Time Machine.” <http://www.kqed.org/quest/television/wetlands-time-machine>

Is there a time hook?

Most science stories benefit from having a reason to publish the story right now rather than at some time in the future. For example, QUEST planned an explanatory story on the physics of baseball, but waited until the start of baseball season to air the story. Watch the QUEST Web story “Anatomy of a Home Run.” <http://www.kqed.org/quest/television/anatomy-of-a-home-run-web-only>

How many people (or animals) are affected?

More people will be interested in your story if it affects a large population, because the subject has a greater chance of impacting them or someone they know. This doesn't mean that stories affecting fewer people are not important to tell, but it explains why newspapers, television, radio and Web sites generally focus on stories aimed at larger audience. For example, San Francisco became the first city in the country to ban plastic bags at large supermarkets. This story affected nearly everyone in San Francisco, as well as all the large supermarket chains. Listen to the QUEST radio report “Paper or Plastic?” <http://www.kqed.org/quest/radio/paper-or-plastic>

ABOUT THE TOOLKIT

This resource is a component of the Media-Making Toolkit for Science Education, developed by KQED Education. The Toolkit includes instructions, worksheets and rubrics to assist educators in implementing media-making projects with students.

For a complete listing of the resources in KQED's Media-Making Toolkit, please visit www.kqed.org/education.

Name:

Date:

Science Story Category Worksheet

Fill out this worksheet to help you understand the different categories of science stories. Come up with your own example of a story for each category.

Story Category	Your Example
<p>1. Breaking News: a story about an important event happening now, with reporters on the scene</p>	
<p>2. Counterintuitive: a story that runs counter to popular assumptions</p>	
<p>3. Surprising: a story that is surprising and memorable; it makes people stop and take notice</p>	
<p>4. Trends: a story that assembles facts and finds patterns to help people better understand their world</p>	
<p>5. Explanatory: a story that explains a concept to help the audience understand something better</p>	