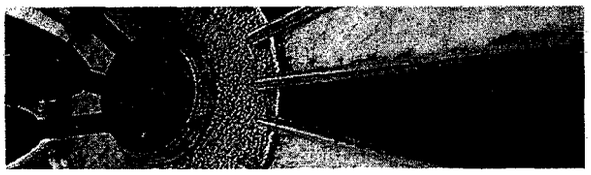
College of Journalism

Taking Notes



Accurate, contemporaneous notes are essential.

In court reporting or when reporting a briefing that isn't being recorded or broadcast, verbatim notes - *or at* least verbatim notes of key quotes - made with pen (or pencil) and paper are vital.

Accuracy is a key component in the qualified privilege defence that offers protection for the journalist in court reporting.

A paraphrase will not do and can be both legally dangerous and hazardous to your reputation.

There is no substitute for fast, clear, accurate shorthand - though speeds below about 120 words per minute (wpm) are generally little more use than longhand.

And the accuracy of your notes isn't limited to *recording* verbatim what a speaker says.

Depending on how you intend to use your notes, you will need to make sure you also record:

- The name, job title, description, age (if relevant) of the speaker
- The context in which the speaker spoke
- Details of dress, appearance, manner, context that may provide important detail for your subsequent story.

Electronic recording

Much of journalist's raw material is now recorded, broadcast or posted to the internet.

This of course means that not only can *you* check the accuracy of your quotes and their context etc but everyone in your audience can too.

It also means that, where the raw material isn't openly available to everyone, you are asking your audiences to place a very high level of trust in you and your ability to accurately *record* and *report* what happened or what was said.

Ideally, you should record electronically any potentially controversial conversation that will form some part of your story, preferably with the speaker's consent.

It is, however, appropriate to record conversations without the speaker's explicit knowledge so long as the recording is for note-taking purposes only.

Truth and Accuracy

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Important links

BBC Editorial Guidelines

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Independence
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Such note-taking recordings, however, should never be broadcast or posted and they shouldn't be made on the basis that 'if they say anything interesting we can use it on-air or online'.

BBC Editorial Guidelines make it clear that there are almost no circumstances where a recording made without the speaker's consent for note-taking purposes can subsequently be used on-air or online.

What to note

It's usually clear what you should be noting. If you're covering a court case or conducting an interview, or huddling around a police officer who's giving an impromptu briefing, your story will be as good as your news sense in recognising potential news lines and noting them verbatim.

But remember, you'll also need to note qualifications and context. Later, when writing up your story, you may judge that these qualifications and context have no relevance. If you don't note them, however, you'll be unable to take them into account.

Often, though, it's not totally clear what you should be noting, particularly if you're researching a long-form feature, investigation or documentary. Or when you're working on a production team setting up interviews and locations. Or are involved in a conversation with a confidential source.

Long-form documentary and investigations will almost always begin with a thesis - an idea that you're setting out to demonstrate, analyse, prove or disprove. Clearly, most of your note-taking will be around this thesis. But you're also on the lookout for counter-evidence. And for how the testimony of one person contrasts with another's, or with the public or leaked documentation.

The way in which the contents of your notes (including recordings made for note-taking and for broadcast) are organised, shared with the team, assessed, considered and ultimately linked to the final script is at least as important as the notes themselves.

And to a large extent it's this process of refinement that defines the kind of thing you need to note:

- Key quotations on the main thesis
- Direct contrary evidence and new questions raised
- The precise questions you asked - easy to forget this, but on a controversial investigation witnesses will often hide a broader truth by answering a question in a carefully precise and limited way
- Who you've approached, why, when and how - timing is often crucial; and on a controversial investigation details of approaches are often contested.

Many investigative teams construct simple grids on which primary notes are entered along with cross-checks; witness that substantiates, challenges or contradicts other witness; new witnesses to approach, new questions and new lines of enquiry.

A grid like this can readily show how the research you've done underpins every line of your eventual script.

But in any event, with controversial investigations and items, it's good practice to keep notes in a form that can be reviewed by other members of the team, especially at the scripting stage.

Production

It's easy to lose focus on precise content - the journalism of it all - when your main job is to fix and organise interviews for a daily news programme or for live and continuous TV or radio news.

The priority is to fix the best interviewee or the guest the editor wants, and to get them to a studio or a place to be interviewed.

There's more to it than that, though.

First, you'll have to brief your presenter or reporter at some point - either verbally or with a written brief. Who (precisely, exactly, accurately) is the guest? Why is he or she on the programme? What does he/she have to say? What are the main developments or arguments your presenter needs to know about?

So it follows that these are the basic things you need to note when you're speaking to your guest.

But you'll often need more than that, especially if the guest or subject is controversial, or when you're trying to arrange a discussion or multi-contributor segment of your show:

- When and how you made your approach - direct or through an intermediary such as a press officer
- What you said in your approach
- What was the response?
- Did you make more than one approach? When? How?
- Did the guest or intermediary try to impose conditions on an appearance?
- What was your response?
- Any details of any agreements - live; as live; interviewed alone etc
- The subject of the interview and the ground you intend to cover - not precise questions
- Any 'get out' clause you used - such as 'and we will of course cover any new developments in this story that happen before the interview'.

The important thing here is to try to anticipate any contested version of events.

It's generally unethical to ambush a guest by inviting them onto your show to discuss one thing and then actually interviewing them about something else; or bouncing them into a discussion; or by making an approach too late in the day for them to accept.

Excuse me a moment

Of course, it's not hugely convenient to whip out a notebook or a voice recorder if you're meeting a source in a social situation - lunch with your local MP, say.

It's important that you make a note, however, at the earliest possible opportunity.

If you can remember the words verbatim - good. But if not, note the general sense ... but don't ever claim afterwards that it's verbatim. And certainly don't use quote marks in your final story.

Storing notes

Your notebooks are essential tools of your trade and you should treat them as such - whether they're pen and paper, notes typed into a computer of some sort or electronic recordings.

It's fine for non-journalists to jot things down on spare bits of paper - it's not fine for a journalist.

You need a clear, accurate record of everything you do; everything people have said to you; everything you've said to them in the course of your work. And you need to keep those records somewhere safe.

There are no limits on the length of time you will need to store your notes.

Many journalists keep them forever and if that's practicable it's the best thing to do. Apart from anything else, they can be a useful reminder of stories you mean to go back to.

If you're working on a controversial investigation or item, you should keep your notes in a secure place until any challenge has been resolved or the time has passed. The same applies to any notes of conversations with confidential sources.

This may be measured in years rather than months.

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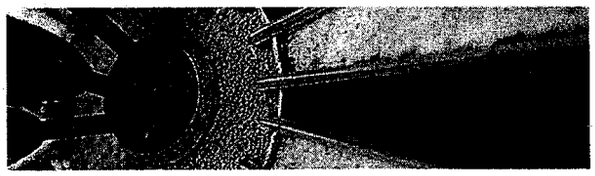
Speed and Accuracy



Every journalist has to resolve the conflicting demands of speed and accuracy.

You want to be first with the story - but you must also be right, in the detail as well as the overall impression your story gives.

For BBC journalists, accuracy is more important than speed - especially on matters that might cause public anxiety. A terrorist attack or plane crash, for example.

Other news organisations have different priorities and differing attitudes to correcting the facts of a breaking story as they emerge. There is a strong argument that, on a breaking story, sharing the verification process with the audience as transparently as possible is the most honest approach.

On the other hand, it's an approach that has been characterised as 'never wrong for long' and risks leaving audiences who don't or can't follow the whole discovery process with a misleading impression of the event.

First reports may often be confused and misleading. Eyewitnesses may give you an account of an incident in all good faith - but theirs is only one viewpoint and they may be mistaken.

Two people involved in a story may recall a sequence of events in different orders. Or ascribe more or less importance to an event.

That's why it's important to weigh the facts you have, especially when events are unfolding quickly.

Dilemmas

The demands of speed versus accuracy can lead to difficult editorial choices - and there may be no right answer.

An important example that has been much discussed and debated occurred in London on the morning of 7 July 2005 - the day suicide bombers killed 52 people and injured 700 more, terrorising commuters and tourists.

Initially, the authorities said the incidents on the London Underground were "thought to be power surges". The BBC, along with other news organisations, reported that. But soon after other outlets, but not the BBC, began to report that the incidents were in fact a series of bombs.

Should the BBC have followed other news organisations? Or was it right to wait until it had verified the reports of bombs itself?

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Writing and Words

What would you have done?

There is a weight of public expectation that the BBC be trustworthy at times of crisis. Many people who don't usually get their news from the BBC choose to do so at times like 7/7.

It is always a finely balanced judgment - it's as dangerous not to tell audiences what's really happening as soon as you can as it is to broadcast unsubstantiated rumour. Often, you can reflect what other reputable news organisations are saying so long as you do so with appropriate attribution and don't present the report as verified fact. In much the same way as you would with another source that you can't immediately verify.

How many sources?

Most news stories, particularly sudden events, break through a news agency or, increasingly, via networking sites on the internet.

It's important to take care when using a single source on a breaking story. If the single source is a bona fide and trusted news agency - the Press Association, Associated Press or Reuters, for example - then it is usually acceptable to report what the news agency is saying, with proper attribution and the caveat that it is an 'unconfirmed report'.

It's not normally acceptable to report a breaking story as fact based on the reports of a single news agency. You should start trying to verify the report as soon as you can by calling those at the scene; the emergency services; authorities in the area that may be in touch with people on the ground.

For BBC journalists, substantiating the report via a BBC correspondent is essential.

Networks

There can be no single approach to using material on a breaking story from social networking sites - Twitter, for example. The most reliable approach is to use the material as a news alert and to begin to verify the story in the normal way.

In context and with appropriate caveats, it may be acceptable to follow a breaking story as it unfolds on a social networking site - as in July 2009 and the events in Iran. But the golden rule at all times is to ensure that the audience cannot mistake this material for authoritative and verified reports.