Nut Grafs

The nut graf (sometimes call the so-what or the perspective paragraph) is the essence, the underlying idea of a story. Generally following an anecdotal or descriptive lead, the nut graf gives the basic news value and describes the significance of what the reader has just been shown.

After a lead that shows, the nut graf tells.

The nut graf is vital because it explains that the story is not about an isolated incident, but that many people are affected.

Lack of a nut graf confuses readers and opens the door to dithering. Lack of one also wastes a good author’s tool: Once the nut graf is in place, sentences and paragraphs throughout the body can be measured against it and discarded if they do not help to make the point or provide reflection upon it.

Here are some examples:

This scenario is far-fetched, but proposed legislation in Congress that would establish a nationwide computer-tracking system for inoculations is getting a closer look.

And that’s not the only problem. The president is counting on national anxiety over a "health care crisis" to generate support for his plan. But the public is unsure that there’s really a crisis at all.

The shy, reclusive ninth-grade dropout from Texas has evolved into a despotic cult leader, able to command hundreds of followers and hold off 400 federal agents for days outside his dusty Mount Carmel compound.

NBC has handed a sword to those who believe that many journalists deserve skewering. This abortionist shortage represents the soft underbelly of the multi-million dollar industry that has grown up around the concept of choice and personal sovereignty.

Prisons are in the news this month because a Republican-sponsored amendment to President Clinton’s crime bill (up for debate in both the House and the Senate) sets aside $3 billion for new jails. But Christian leaders are divided over whether more prisons are necessary.

Here is an example of how to go from lead to nut. First, you powerfully present the situation.

They kicked open his door in the middle of the night during a power outage last month, blinded him with flashlights while others in the house were being beaten and interrogated. Six others who accompanied Dennis Balcombe on that trip to mainland China last month were arrested as well. Three are still missing, at first rumored to be executed, but now said to be held without being allowed visitors.

Then comes the nut graf:
Dennis Balcombe sees little of the progress China is claiming in its human rights record, progress the Clinton administration says must be made before China’s Most Favored Nation trade status is extended in June. China, Balcombe says after his four-day ordeal, is repeating the atrocities of Mao.

An investigative report often presents the subject in action. First comes the lead.

Satanists and the demon-possessed show up frequently in Bob Larson’s ministry, and they love to dial 1-800-821-TALK for apocalyptic showdowns with the energetic radio talk-show host. For two hours every day, via satellite from Denver, almost 200 radio stations across the country hear Larson’s slugfest with the supernatural, ”Talk-Back" with Bob Larson.

"What do you want? Mr. Milquetoast?" he says in a promotional tape. "Hey, flip the dial. This is me, this is real, this is ‘Talk-Back.’”

Then the nut graf:

But 13 past Larson associates interviewed for this story—nine speaking openly, four confidentially—challenge Larson’s public image.