ORGANIZATION TIP SHEET

FOCUS, FOCUS, FOCUS

1. Before you can organize your story, you must be clear about its focus — the purpose of the story. Ask yourself what is the story about. Try stating that in one sentence. That should be your focus. Pretend you are telling your editor or your friend what your story is about.

2. Headline — If you are having trouble deciding what your focus is, try thinking of a headline for it.

ORGANIZING THE BODY

1. Outline — You don't have to write a formal outline, but it helps to sketch out the main ideas. Then jot down key words of the quotes or notes that you will use for backup of those main ideas.

2. Order -- The order of your story may be inverted pyramid, hourglass (chronological after hard news lead), Wall Street Journal formula or other basic structure. Whatever order you choose, know where you want to go in the story. Make a road map of sorts.

3. Develop a chronology, time lines or consequence lines.

4. Think of the story in parts. Think of subheads to identify main parts.

5. Make up a test. If you had to test the reader on the most important parts of your story, what questions would you write?

6. Free write -- If you are stuck, put down your notes and just write what you remember. Chances are you'll remember the important parts. Then you can go back in your notes and get the accurate quotes and information.

7. Be selective -- Author Elmore Leonard says: "I try to leave out the parts that people skip." You don't need all the information you have gathered, nor can you use every quote you have from a speaker. Take the best; discard the rest.

8. Read out loud -- If it doesn't make sense when you hear it, the order is probably weak.

9. Vary the pace -- Intersperse text with quotes and anecdotes. You don't want all the heavy, factual material in a huge block. Weave in the facts carefully, using good quotes for backup to break up the pace. Use long and short sentences to vary the pace as well.

10. Have a good idea of how you want to end. Review the lead and nut graph to see if you have accomplished what you promised to deliver. The lead may give you a good clue for the end.
ORGANIZATION CHECKLIST

1. What questions would the reader have? (Put the material in the order the reader would want the questions answered).

2. Will the lead grab the reader's attention?

3. Have you backed up the lead and nut graph?

4. Have you substantiated each point with a quote, explanatory material or other information?

5. Is any more information needed?

6. Is there information you should delete?

7. Can you state the theme of the story in one sentence?

8. Does the story bog down when you read it aloud or silently.

9. Have you kept your tenses consistent (says or said throughout).

10. Does each paragraph make a single point?

11. Do the sentences and paragraphs vary in length and structure?

12. Are the verbs active?

13. Have you avoided vague adjectives?

14. Are there sentences and paragraphs that are repetitious?

15. Are there quotes that repeat the previous or succeeding paragraph?

16. Are the names accurate?

17. Are there any figures that don't add up?

18. Is the story interesting?

19. Are there any typos or misspelled words?

20. Is the story fair?
The Inverted Pyramid

Putting the most important facts at the beginning of the story was developed in the mid-1800s when reporters began to use the telegraph to transmit stories back to their newspapers. Because the telegraph lines were unreliable the reporters found that their narrative style of journalism would get cut off by a dropped line. They then began to push the important facts to the top of the story and provided detail as the story unfolded. If a line failed they would have given the paper the most important information first.

In the Associated Press story below you'll notice that the news story is in classic inverted pyramid form. The reader could stop after the first paragraph and get the heart of the story. Also notice it answers the five "W"s of journalism.

Example

LONDON - Two London commuter trains smashed into each other during rush hour today killing 26 passengers and injuring 160 on the same rail line as another fatal crash two years ago. Ambulance and fire crews, police and rail workers swarmed around the overturned, mangled rail cars for hours, locating and freeing injured survivors in the smoldering wreckage near the Ladbrooke Grove residential area in west London. The cause of the accident was not immediately known.
WALL STREET
JOURNAL
FORMULA

This form starts with a soft lead, focusing on a person, scene or event. It is followed by a focus graph, called the nut graph. Then the story proceeds with elaboration of each point. It often ends in a circular manner, with a return to the initial focus.
Sections

This technique is very useful for long stories. Each section has a lead and a kicker ending.

The most common form for section stories is the use of time frames: present, past, present and future.

Section stories may also be arranged according to different points of view if the story focuses on an event through the eyes of different people.

If the story is written in narrative form, it may be organized as different chapters in the story.

The key to making this technique effective is the kicker at the end of each section. The kicker should compel the reader to continue reading.