

Writing News : EFL Students Construct a “News Article Paragraph”

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1. Introduction

The first line of a hard news article should contain the most important information of the story, most importantly the WHO and WHAT information related to the news event (Swingley, 2008). However, the body of the story exists to flesh out the details and it allows the reader to fully understand what happened. In the body of an article, missing details are explained, and unanswered WHO? WHAT? WHEN? WHERE? or HOW? questions are tackled. Whether or not these questions are answered depends upon the writer’s judgment regarding what he or she feels that the reader would like to learn.

For example, let us assume that a new president has been elected in a foreign country. The lead of the story might look something like this :

Douglas Smith was elected president of Aalia today in a triumphant return to political office. He garnered 57% of the vote in a show of support which surprised many longtime observers of the country.

In this example, as in most well-written leads, the WHO and WHAT are answered in the first line.

WHO : Douglas Smith

WHAT : elected president

In addition, other details are included in the lead which the writer feels are important enough to be included at the top of the story :

WHEN : today

WHERE : Aalia

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HOW : he received 57% of the vote

If this were a news story meant to be shared in the broadcast media, for example on the radio, it might end here. In newswriting for broadcast media, “News segments are often short, so information has to be conveyed quickly and simply” (Farber, 2014).

However, the length of a newspaper article is limited only by the amount of available space ; articles, in some cases, can be quite extensive. Therefore, the writer of the story above may choose to tackle various questions in the body of the article that he or she feels may interest the reader :

What was the demographic breakdown of the vote?

Which political offices has Smith previously held?

Why did the results of the election surprise longtime observers of the country?

When will he officially take office?

What were a few of the main themes of his campaign?

While there are different perspectives on how the body of a newspaper article should be constructed, they share common elements. To meet the challenges of an ESL/EFL student learning how to write news, it is worthwhile to explore several of them and determine common elements which can help us build a framework for instruction.

In this era of rapid globalization, in which use of the internet is deeply enmeshed in our lives and one is never more than a click or a tap away from the latest national and international news, it is incumbent upon educators to help students enhance their ability to sort through and make sense of this onslaught of information. Teaching students to analyze and create the structure of a news article can assist in doing this.

2. Literature Review

One view holds that there are three central options for writing the body of the story. It can be told (A) chronologically, (B) in descending order based on the relative importance of the key points, or (C) using a combination of the two approaches (Media Helping Media, 2015). In practice, information covered by the three approaches might be applied to our election article in the following manner :

A. Chronological

1. Smith had previously been president of Aalia from 1978-1986
2. Smith left office in a military coup
3. Decades of military rule followed

4. Corruption and a failing economy led to a popular revolt
5. Military compelled to hold election
6. Surprising longtime observers, Smith wins presidency with 57% of the vote
7. He will take office on June 15
8. He promises to revive the economy and end corruption

B. Descending order

1. Smith wins presidency with 57% of the vote, surprising longtime observers
2. Term begins on June 15
3. He promises to revive the economy and end corruption
4. Military had been compelled to hold election
5. Corruption and a failing economy led to a popular revolt
6. Smith had previously been president of Aalia from 1978-1986
7. His presidency followed by decades of military rule
8. He had been compelled to leave office in a military coup

C. Combination

May vary widely depending upon preferred writing style or specific intent of writer/editor. For example the focus could be on the election itself, the promises made by Smith, or the “surprising” shift from military rule.

One might note that much of the information shared in the hypothetical article outlines above actually occurred before the main news event (Smith wins presidency) of the story. In the context of a news article, this is called *background information*. Prior knowledge about a subject area should not be assumed by the writer. Rather, a journalist should write as if the reader knows little or nothing about the history of the topic, and thus should provide it (KTNNet Africa, 2016). If a late-breaking story leads the editor to require more space for an article and it is close to the time of publication, background information may be cut from various articles to help create that additional necessary space without deleting an entire article (Knight, 2010, p. 22).

While formulating a guideline to help ESL/EFL students write the body of a news article, it is helpful to examine clear advice meant for young students of journalism learning the craft. For example, a private Montreal high school which produces a well-constructed newspaper advises the following :

- Provide details to the reader

- Articles should be written in the third person
- Always be objective (do not state your opinion or reveal bias)
- If an opinion does appear in the article, it should be attributed to another person
- Use active rather than passive verbs
- Paragraphs should be no longer than about five sentences long
- Additional information about a topic in the article can be added near the conclusion of the article, or after a quote (Loyola, 2016).

The well-known and authoritative guide to basic reporting called the News Manual has several useful suggestions regarding the construction of the body of a news article (Henshall & Ingram, 2008).

Simplicity : The language and grammar of the article should be clear and not overly complicated. In contrast to the example above, the Manual recommends paragraphs of only one or two sentences. (This is sensible, as narrow column widths in newspapers lead to exceptionally lengthy paragraphs if they contain too many sentences).

Accuracy : Information included in the story must be precise and accurate. Details help to add a sense of authority to the article. For example, Douglas Smith will take office on precisely June 15, not on an undetermined, unstated later date. Likewise, it is generally understood that specifically both corruption and a failing economy led to the revolt.

Sequence and continuity : As in our previous example (chronological, descending, combination), the order of information in the article is deemed to be important. Here, it is recommended that the writer determine the order of information based upon the type of story. Chronological order is recommended for an event such as a cyclone or a rescue : a story about a single event at a fixed point in time. However, an article about a debate over an issue or an election campaign, an event taking place over time with different key points that need to be covered, may invite an approach other than chronological. The content of the story should help to dictate the sequence in which the news in the article appears, rather than strictly the preference of the writer. So, from this perspective, if the focus of the writer's story is on the process by which Douglas Smith came to power, a combination approach might be appropriate. However, if the focus of the story is on the election itself, a sequential approach

would possibly be the more effective style.

Attribution : Attribute information to a source whenever possible. This adds to the perception that the information in the body of the story is reliable. For example, “Smith took 57% of the vote” may not be as effective a statement as “Smith took 57% of the vote according to the Federal Election Commission”.

Background : As with a source previously referenced in this paper, it is felt here that the writer should not assume that the reader knows any previous information regarding the story. Thus, it is imperative that 1-2 paragraphs of *background information* are included to ensure that the article is fully understandable to the reader. For example, many readers may not be familiar with much information regarding (fictional) Aalia, so a paragraph such as the following would enhance our election article :

Aalia, an island nation in the West Pacific Ocean, has undergone seventeen changes in government since World War II. Recent years have seen tourism dollars dry up as political instability has kept vacationers from visiting its pristine beaches and luxury hotels.

Finally, the leading news agency *Reuters* provides instruction for writing the body of a news article. According to their handbook, aspiring journalists should :

- Ensure that parts of the article follow logically. For example, information about a coup in Aalia should be focused in one area of the article, rather than in paragraphs in separate parts of the article. Readers become confused by a scattershot portrayal of information.
- Use “signposts” to make it clear in the article that one area of interest has been completed, and a new theme will be explored. For example, a summary of information that will follow a paragraph can be included.
- Make sure that there are no “holes” in the body of the article. If something is mentioned, it must be explained in sufficient detail.
- Be very careful to check for errors. Common checks for errors include ensuring that the headline agrees with the copy (text) of the article, checking that quotes or evidence (attribution) are included that support the lead, checking spelling of proper names, checking for mistakes in numbers, and checking the accuracy of dates and times (Reuters, 2014).

We have examined several different approaches to writing the body of a news article. Although they differ in certain respects, there are common elements which can help guide us to a simple, standard set of rules governing their construction. It is useful to examine a typical, brief, well-written hard news article by the Associated Press :

June 30, 2009

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Internet giant Yahoo plans to open a data center in western New York.

Gov. David Paterson says that the center in Lockport north of Buffalo is expected to begin operating in January 2011 and will create about 125 jobs.

The governor says construction of the center, housing computer systems and other equipment, is expected to begin this fall.

Based in Sunnyvale, Yahoo has been expanding its number of data centers around the country. The centers use a large amount of energy, and Paterson says Tuesday that the New York Power Authority came up with a low-cost power plan to lure Yahoo to Lockport.

(No Author Cited, AP, 2009)

Although this article isn't very long, it provides examples of many rules included in the various guidelines we have examined :

- Attribution is used for any information which could be inaccurate or considered to be an opinion, to avoid the appearance of bias and to add to the perception that the information in the story is reliable.

(Gov. David Paterson says that the center...will create about 125 jobs.)

- The paragraphs are short, usually no more than 3 sentences.

(1 sentence, 1 sentence, 1 sentence, 2 sentences)

- The descriptions of people, places, and things are *varied*, and are sometimes written in such a way that they include extra *background information*.

person : *Gov. David Paterson, the governor, Paterson*

place : *western New York, Lockport north of Buffalo, Lockport*

thing : *Internet giant Yahoo Inc., Yahoo*

- The background information is in the middle or the end of the article, because it is inessential information and can easily be cut by an editor if it suddenly becomes necessary to make more space for a new article.

(Based in Sunnyvale, Yahoo has been expanding...)

- The order of information depends upon the type of story. This article describes the opening of a new data center, the motive to build it, and its benefits, rather than a single news event which happened at a fixed point in time. Thus, the sequence of information can best be described as combination.

- There are *details* which help to lend a sense of authority to the story.

(January 2011, about 125 jobs, this fall)

- The article is *objective*, as there is no indication of the reporter's opinion regarding the data center.

- It is written in the *third person*.

- Additional information is added after an *indirect quote*

(The governor says construction of the center, housing computer systems and other equipment, is expected to begin this fall.)

3. Study

3.1 Guideline

While the instruction and writing of well-constructed news articles is not a standard part of ESL/EFL curricula, most English language students do have experience in basic paragraph writing. Thus, a teacher with the goal of teaching his or her ESL/EFL students to write news articles may wish to try a novel half-step toward the completion of a full news article : the "News Article Paragraph". This study tackles the question of which elements of News Article Paragraph writing can be successfully rendered by a group of ESL/EFL students based on the following guideline, and which elements will require further instruction or perhaps an alternate method of instruction.

In addition to improving student writing, it is hoped that students who are able to successfully construct a News Article Paragraph (NAP) will be better equipped to subsequently read and understand news articles written in English.

Furthermore, the topic of "fake news" vs. "real news" has been a hot topic in the aftermath of the 2016

United States presidential election (Issac, 2016). A thorough understanding of the structure of a well-written news article might help students to differentiate between the two types of articles, in that a “real news” article must be supported by verifiable facts whenever possible, and this is an essential component of the NAP.

In this novel construction, I have included several of the central elements of the standard, well-written hard news article, but simplified and abbreviated into a single paragraph for EFL/ESL instructional purposes. It is an entire news article condensed into its simplest possible form (other than an outline).

News Article Paragraph :

1. The paragraph should consist of 4-6 sentences.
2. The first sentence of the paragraph shall be the *lead*. (In a full-size article, the lead may extend past the first sentence). The lead must include a reference to the WHAT information of the story (what is the main point?) and perhaps the WHO information if it is essential information to the main point (Douglas Smith was elected).
3. The structure of the remainder of the paragraph will depend upon the type of event covered. For a single news event that occurred at a fixed point in time, the news in the paragraph should be presented in *chronological* order. For other types of news, a *descending* or *combination* approach should be utilized. (Like most or perhaps all rules of writing, they are meant to be broken by accomplished writers, and certainly professionally-written news articles do not always adhere to this. But for the purposes of beginning news writing instruction it is helpful to stick to guidelines. In this way, students will have no choice but to become accustomed to various styles of news article construction as they encounter different types of stories).
4. The NAP should not reveal any bias on the part of the writer.
5. Whenever possible, *attribution* should be provided for information in the story.
6. *Details* will enable the story to become more authoritative. Details may include facts and figures related to the WHAT element reported in the first sentence.
7. The NAP may conclude with *background information*, a *direct or indirect quote*, or a relatively *unimportant detail* of the story. However, it should not restate the main topic or include essential information, as an editor may need to cut it to save space.

3.2 Assessment

For assessment, I constructed a rubric. One advantage of a rubric is that it is flexible : it can be used effectively for peer assessment, self-assessment, or by the teacher. Another is that it frames the assessment in such a way that it encourages students to revise and improve their writing. Rubrics are particularly valuable in second language assessment (Outeiral, 2014). The process of planning, revising, and editing helps students to become better writers, and self-regulated learners (Saddler & Andrade, 2004).

Table 1. Rubric for News Article Paragraph (NAP) Writing

| <i>OBJECTIVE</i> | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
|----------------------|---|--|---|---|
| <i>NAP length</i> | Length is appropriate | Slightly too short or long (it does not have enough information/ has some unnecessary sentences) | Too short or long (it has little information/ has many unnecessary sentences) | Much too short or long (it has very little information/ has far too many sentences) |
| <i>Lead</i> | Fully answers the WHAT question (and WHO if it is relevant to the story) | Partially answers the WHAT question (and WHO if it is relevant to the story) | Provides minimal WHAT or WHO information | No WHAT or WHO information |
| <i>NAP structure</i> | Chronological, descending, or combination approach is used appropriately and effectively | Chronological, descending, or combination approach is used appropriately but not effectively | Chronological, descending, or combination approach is used, but not appropriately | Chronological, descending, or combination approaches are not used |
| <i>Objectivity</i> | No bias is evident in the article | One instance of bias is evident in the article | Two instances of bias are evident in the article | Three or more instances of bias are evident in the article |
| <i>Attribution</i> | All information in the story is attributed to an appropriate source | The information in the story is attributed to sources of varying quality | Some information in the story is not attributed to a source | There are no uses of attribution in the story |
| <i>Details</i> | Relevant facts and figures related to the WHAT element reported in the first sentence are evident | Facts and figures related (but not always relevant) to the WHAT element reported in the first sentence are evident | NAP includes few facts and figures | There are no uses of facts and figures in the NAP |
| <i>Conclusion</i> | Concludes with effective use of background information, quote, or unimportant detail | Concludes with ineffective use of background information, quote, or unimportant detail | Does not conclude with background information, quote, or unimportant detail | No conclusion evident, ends mid-story |

4. Method

4.1 Participants

This study included 75 NAP paragraphs derived at random from the work of 60 1st-4th year undergraduate university students. They are comprised of Biomedical Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Civil and Environmental Engineering, Electrical, Electronic and Communications Engineering, Applied Chemistry, and Architecture majors of high beginner - intermediate English ability.

4.2 Materials

Students were taught this method of creating a news paragraph orally and with the use of examples. They created NAP paragraphs over a period of several weeks, and compiled them as part of their “news files” projects. Students were encouraged to research and compile news articles on various topics that interested them, such as technology, politics, and culture, and then use the facts in the stories to create original NAP paragraphs. The language used and the focus of the leads and themes covered in their NAP paragraphs were allowed to deviate considerably from the source material. Thus, the students had creative freedom to produce truly original work as opposed to simply summarizing or paraphrasing. If, for example, a student felt that the main focus of a story about Douglas Smith becoming president of Aalia should be about his plans for the future rather than the election itself, he or she was free to cover it that way in the NAP.

5. Results

5.1 Examples of student work

Sample Student NAP 1 :

Indian tiger's genetic diversity is decreased during British Raj. In Raj, numbers of tiger reduced to 1,800 from 40,000, that is caused by trophy hunting. Scientists detected high number of DNA variant from tigers shot in Raj. 93% of the variant is not detected in living tigers. Scientist says, "that is due to the loss of habitat and habitat fragmentation".

Reference material used by the student : (Kundul, TNN, 2013)

Notes :

| <i>OBJECTIVE</i> | <i>Rubric score</i> |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| <i>NAP length</i> | 4 |
| <i>Lead</i> | 4 |
| <i>NAP structure</i> | 4 |
| <i>Objectivity</i> | 4 |
| <i>Attribution</i> | 3 |
| <i>Details</i> | 4 |
| <i>Conclusion</i> | 4 |

This NAP is very well constructed. The lead fully answers the WHAT question, it shows no bias on the part of the writer, and it makes use of both attribution and details, although the attribution should be more specific. It ends with a quote.

Sample Student NAP 2 :

China has the largest number of internet population that is 632 million. However, the growth is very slowing. It's the lowest growth in 8 years. There were 632 million Internet users, and 450 million non-Internet users. Its parcentration is 46.9 percent, that lower than U.S. which has 87%. However, almost all of non-Internet users are low education levels. Chinese government better focus on low education people.

Reference material used by the student : (Kan, IDG, 2014)

Notes :

| <i>OBJECTIVE</i> | <i>Rubric score</i> |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| <i>NAP length</i> | 4 |
| <i>Lead</i> | 2 |
| <i>NAP structure</i> | 1 |
| <i>Objectivity</i> | 3 |
| <i>Attribution</i> | 1 |
| <i>Details</i> | 4 |
| <i>Conclusion</i> | 1 |

The NAP paragraph above has serious deficiencies. The lead focuses on a detail which does not represent the main idea of the remainder of the NAP (the body should support the lead). A chronological, descending, or combination approach is not utilized effectively, so the paragraph does not make logical sense. There is good use of details, but they are not attributed. There is bias evident in the conclusion, and it does not include back-

ground information, a quote, or unimportant detail.

Sample Student NAP 3 :

The world's first "Solar Road" has been introduced in Netherlands, small village as a test. "Solar Road" is a literal meaning. It is a solar panel set on the roads. It's already producing power more than we expected. This power makes for street lighting, traffic systems, households, electric car and so on. But the road is only 70 meter. It's very short. So in the future a lot of electric power is generated by using this technology on more big scale.

Reference material used by the student : (Mellino, EW, 2015)

Notes :

| <i>OBJECTIVE</i> | <i>Rubric score</i> |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| <i>NAP length</i> | 4 |
| <i>Lead</i> | 4 |
| <i>NAP structure</i> | 4 |
| <i>Objectivity</i> | 3 |
| <i>Attribution</i> | 1 |
| <i>Details</i> | 3 |
| <i>Conclusion</i> | 2 |

This NAP paragraph is well written, but contains significant flaws. The lead does a good job of targeting the main idea of the story. The descending structure of the NAP effectively frames the body of the paragraph. The details are good, but some attribution would help them become more authoritative, including the claim in the conclusion.

Sample Student NAP 4 :

Human hands really more primitive than chimp hands according to new research. Researcher have thought that human ancestors were like a monkey which we always imagine and evolved. But it may not be true. For researcher says that the hands of our ancestor were very similar to our own. So, our hands have not changed significantly since old times.

Reference material used by the student : (Dussault, CSM, 2015)

Notes :

| <i>OBJECTIVE</i> | <i>Rubric score</i> |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| <i>NAP length</i> | 4 |
| <i>Lead</i> | 4 |
| <i>NAP structure</i> | 4 |
| <i>Objectivity</i> | 2 |
| <i>Attribution</i> | 3 |
| <i>Details</i> | 3 |
| <i>Conclusion</i> | 2 |

The paragraph above has an excellent lead. It is good that attribution is used, however in the body of the NAP it should be specified further. The paragraph includes good use of an indirect quote, and pertinent details. The conclusion does not seem to be an intentional instance of bias, but without attribution it could be interpreted that way.

Sample Student NAP 5 :

Most of American people don't believe the Big Bang. The Big Bang question data was enough to upset some of America's top scientists. The number of people think the universe began with a huge explosion is true is 32-38%. Astronomers, too. And scientific knowledge little has changed now. But, its knowledge not change for two decades.

Reference material used by the student : (Madrigal, The Atlantic, 2014)

Notes :

| <i>OBJECTIVE</i> | <i>Rubric score</i> |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| <i>NAP length</i> | 4 |
| <i>Lead</i> | 4 |
| <i>NAP structure</i> | 3 |
| <i>Objectivity</i> | 4 |
| <i>Attribution</i> | 2 |
| <i>Details</i> | 3 |
| <i>Conclusion</i> | 2 |

This NAP paragraph begins with a lead which neatly sums up the main idea of the story. It uses data well, although the statistic should be attributed. There are no instances of bias. The conclusion is appropriate, however the paragraph would benefit from more clarity in the concluding sentences.

5.2 Results summary

All NAP articles checked in this study :

NAP length : Average rubric score 3.5

Most students were usually able to produce a NAP paragraph of appropriate length.

Lead : Average rubric score 3

The leads of most NAP paragraphs were generally well structured and they accurately portrayed the main idea. The most common error found in the leads was the reporting of a detail of the story which, while relevant, was not of central importance and thus would have been more appropriate as an element in the body of the NAP.

NAP structure : Average rubric score 3

Most paragraphs effectively followed a chronological, descending, or combination approach. The most common structural errors were sentences which did not appear to follow any logical order and thus it was difficult to determine the main idea of the story, as in Sample Student NAP 2. This suggests that this student could benefit from basic paragraph writing instruction.

Objectivity : Average rubric score 3

Although most NAP paragraphs did not demonstrate major instances of bias, many body sentences were not completely objective, as positive or negative descriptive adjectives without attribution were common. Students would benefit from reading additional examples of professionally written hard news articles with an focus on isolating expressions of opinion paired with attribution.

Attribution : Average rubric score 2.5

Many NAP paragraphs did not use attribution successfully and students could use additional instruction in this. In a hard news story, quotes, statistics, many facts and opinions need attribution.

Details : Average rubric score 3

In most NAP paragraphs, students successfully added facts and figures related to the WHAT element reported in the first sentence. Some paragraphs lacked sufficient details, while others included statistics without naming the source. Students would benefit from instruction in the identification of credible, widely accepted sources of statistics.

Conclusion : Average rubric score 2

The conclusion was a trouble spot in numerous NAP paragraphs. A common problem was ending with text other than background information, a quote, or unimportant detail. Another error was concluding mid-story, suggesting that important information pertinent to the focus of the NAP main idea had not been included.

6. Conclusion

The present study builds on previous research regarding the writing of the body of a news article, and modifies it for use in the NAP framework. It identifies and describes seven key components of a NAP paragraph, and introduces a novel rubric for use in its assessment. Student work based on the NAP framework is discussed, as well as common errors found in the larger body of work analyzed for this study, and suggestions for student improvement are shared. It is hoped that the NAP framework can be of use to ESL/EFL teachers taking on news article writing in their classes.

One limitation of this study is that the information used by the students in the NAP paragraphs was derived from previously published articles, as opposed to original research. This is helpful to an EFL/ESL learner as it allows for a large amount of exposure to and the modeling of extremely well-written journalistic work. However, the collection of original data might reveal a different set of deficiencies in the paragraphs. Another limitation of the study is that students were able to choose the topics they wrote about. Perhaps requiring them to create NAP paragraphs on news topics outside their areas of interest or “comfort zones” would be more beneficial to their journalistic writing skills, and their writing ability in general. It should also be noted that considerable preparation may be needed by the teacher to provide modified versions of suitable news articles to serve as models for teaching the rubric.

This research suggests areas for further exploration. For example, in a subsequent assignment, students could be asked to create NAP paragraphs and then full articles based on original reporting. Assignments produced by this group of students could be compared to the writing of students without NAP training in order to analyze if NAP creation is effective in improving the quality of the articles, and is thus a worthwhile addition to an ESL/EFL curriculum that includes journalistic writing.

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【Abstract】

ニュース記事を書く：EFLの生徒が
「ニュース記事の段落」を構成

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上手く構成されたニュース記事を書くことは、英語のネイティブスピーカーにとってさえも難しい作業です。EFLの生徒にとっては、適切な指導がなければ極めて難しい作業になります。記事の冒頭部には記事の中で最も重要な情報が提供され、それに続く本文でより多くの詳細情報が提供されます。本論文では、ニュース記事の本文構成に関する文献をレビューし、非常に基本的な重大ニュースの記事を「ニュース記事の段落」という形式に従って書くための新しいガイドラインについて説明し、さらにこの形式に従って行われたレッスンの結果として書かれた学生の記事を新しいルーブリック評価を用いて分析します。

キーワード：重大ニュース、ESL/EFL、ニュースの段落、新聞記事を書く、ニュース記事の本文

Writing a well-constructed news article is a complex task, even for a native speaker of English. For an EFL learner, it can be maddeningly difficult without the proper guidance. After the lead of the article, in which the most important information of the story is shared, the body of an article contains the bulk of the details. In this paper, literature regarding the construction of the lead and body of a news article is reviewed, a novel set of guidelines for writing a very basic hard news article in the format of a “News Article Paragraph” is described, and resultant student work is analyzed through the use of a new rubric.

Key words : hard news, ESL/EFL, news paragraph, newspaper article writing, body of a news article

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