



More than 70 hogs lost their lives when this barn caught on fire outside of Urbana, Ohio, in 2005.

Covering fires

Some may be harmless, but others make history — and headlines.

The bigger the fire, the bigger the story. Small fires are common in kitchens, barns and grassy fields — and unless someone is injured, they're usually treated as briefs or listed in weekly "fire run" round-ups. You can write these stories without leaving the newsroom, using facts provided in fire department reports or news releases.

But for fires where death, displacement or major damage results, you need to visit the scene — ideally, while firefighters are battling the blaze — to supplement the basic facts with quotes, color and dramatic tales of risk and rescue.

GUIDELINES FOR REPORTING AND WRITING FIRE STORIES

- ◆ **Identify yourself.** If you're not carrying a video camera with a station logo on it, make sure your press credentials are in plain sight.
- ◆ **Find the command post** — or "Command," as it's usually called. Look for a car parked beside the fire scene (often with a flashing green light). That's where you'll find the fire battalion chief who's coordinating the operation. If you're not sure where to go, ask directions from a police officer or firefighter.
- ◆ **Introduce yourself** to Command. They'll either assist you or direct you to a public information officer (PIO). Ask essential questions immediately (Where's the fire? Is it under control? How'd it start? Anyone hurt?), then get out of the way and let the team do its job. Avoid interfering with rescue workers or firefighters unless it's obvious that they're free to talk.

- ◆ **Get as close as you can**, but protect your own safety. (Fires, collapsing structures, even the blast from a stray fire hose can kill you.) Observe any yellow *DO NOT CROSS* lines. And unless you're specifically given approval or escort, don't trespass on private property or contaminate crime/fire scenes.
- ◆ **Wear boots.** And be prepared to go home stinking of smoke.
- ◆ **Remember, firefighters can provide dramatic details**, but individual firefighters rarely know the whole story. As a rule, only a battalion chief or PIO can be trusted to convey the big picture accurately. Firefighters can gauge structural damage (i.e., light, moderate, heavy or a total loss). But for the official cause of the fire or estimates of the damage costs, talk to the PIO, the fire marshal or the building's owner. Don't attempt to make guesses yourself.

- ◆ **Watch your language.** Dramatic fires may inspire you to wax poetic about those *brave heroes subduing the blazing inferno amid rivers of fire*. But stick to the facts. Instead of calling them *towering flames*, be specific and describe them as *flames 50 feet high*. Other words to use with caution:
 - ▶ **Destroyed** means ruined beyond recovery. A building is either destroyed or it isn't; don't write that it's *partially destroyed* or *totally destroyed*. When in doubt, use the word *damaged*.
 - ▶ **Conflagration** is used to describe a raging, destructive fire that's large (several city blocks) or uncontrolled.
 - ▶ **Holocaust** means "destruction of life by fire." Because of its association with the Nazi's extermination of Jews, avoid using it in routine fire stories.
 - ▶ A fire **guts** a building by destroying its interior. A structure is **razed** when it is leveled with the ground.

CHECKLIST

When writing a story on a fire, be sure to include:

- ◆ **Victims:** names, ages, addresses, any other relevant personal information. Double-check all spellings.
- ◆ **Extent of injuries/cause of death.** Identify hospitals where the injured were taken.
- ◆ **Type of building:** home, trailer, warehouse, etc. If it's a commercial building, what do they make or do there?
- ◆ **Location.**
- ◆ **Time:** when the fire started, how long firefighters fought the blaze.
- ◆ **How the fire was discovered** or reported.
- ◆ **Cause of the fire,** according to informed authorities. Avoid any speculation by victims or bystanders.
- ◆ **Number of firefighters** required to put out the fire.
- ◆ **Estimated cost of damage.**
- ◆ **Extent of insurance coverage.**
- ◆ **Acts of heroism** or dramatic rescues. Who? By whom? Emphasize this aspect of the story.
- ◆ **Weather,** especially if wind, rain or heat played a role in fire's behavior or firefighters' efforts.
- ◆ **Effect of the fire on evacuees** — those driven from their homes or forced out of work.
- ◆ **Plans to relocate victims or rebuild structures.**
- ◆ **Arrests or citations** made by police. Is arson suspected?
- ◆ **Anecdotes and descriptions** from firefighters, eyewitnesses, victims, building owners or neighbors.
- ◆ **Any other unusual aspects** of the fire: Did it shut down traffic? Create power outages? Have there been previous fires at this site, or other similar fires lately that reflect a pattern worth investigating?



Luis Davila carries his 2-year-old son, Abraham, through the charred remains of their home in Medford, Ore., after it was destroyed by fire in 2005. "He was the one inside the house when the fire started," said Davila, cradling the boy. "He had smoke coming out of his nose."

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OPTIONS FOR ORGANIZING YOUR DETAILS AND DRAMA

WRITING THE LEAD

As in any other breaking story, if death or injury is the most newsworthy element, it should leap to the top of the lead:

Six firefighters were injured and nearly 150 senior citizens were left homeless Wednesday night after a fire ripped through a retirement community in west Milford.

If no one was hurt, the lead should focus on the most compelling aspect of the story. And though this works —

An early-morning fire Friday destroyed a farmhouse south of Springfield.

— you don't want to overuse the same basic *what* lead ("A fire destroyed a warehouse Monday" . . . "A fire tore through an Eastview trailer park Friday. . ."). Look for other lead options: the *who* or the *why*, for instance —

Two Brookdale children escaped a fire that broke out in their bedroom Sunday by leaping out a second-floor window.

Illegal fireworks sparked a fire that destroyed a South Lyon home Friday afternoon.

If appropriate, you can use an alternative lead approach —

Terry Hohner left his Portland home shortly before 8 a.m. Thursday to go bowling. That might have saved his life. Minutes after Hohner drove away, his neighbors heard an explosion and saw flames leaping out of his house on Thurman Street. . . .

— but remember, feature-style leads convey less urgency than news leads. And you must be careful *never* to make light of someone's personal tragedy.

To read how the Newark Star-Ledger covered a fatal fire in a university dormitory, visit **THE MORGUE** ▶ 216.

COVERING THE AFTERMATH

Some fires are important or emotionally charged enough to warrant follow-up coverage. You may need to report new details about the fire's cause, its impact on the community or the status of its victims. The human tragedy of those victimized by fire produces powerful journalism. (For an example, see the story behind the photo above.)

ADDING DRAMATIC NARRATIVE

Certain events (fires, disasters, crimes) offer opportunities for narrative storytelling. Episodes of struggle and survival provide extra suspense and realism to stories when they unfold chronologically.

You can begin your story with a standard news lead, then segue into a dramatic narrative when it's appropriate. (There's a story form — the Martini — that does this ▼).

OR you can begin the story with the narrative, crafting a suspenseful anecdotal lead as this story does:

As firefighters finished dousing flames in the wood-frame bungalow Wednesday, neighbors of Clement Williams held their breath.

Did he get out before the fire consumed his side of the duplex? Had he walked down the street to Abella's restaurant and left his Oldsmobile parked in the driveway?

Diane Miller held her hand to her mouth and repeated, "Please don't let him be in there," over and over.

But her husband, David Miller, who kicked in Williams' door but couldn't find anything in the thick smoke, shook his head.

"I know he's in there," Miller said quietly in the middle of the commotion. "He's always home this time of day, taking a nap."

Minutes later, as firefighters acknowledged that Williams, 54, had been trapped inside, Diane Miller began sobbing and fell into her husband's arms. . . . [Angela Moore, *St. Petersburg Times*]

To read the full text of another fire story that effectively incorporates dramatic narrative, visit **THE MORGUE** ▶ 220.

A TEAM EFFORT:

COVERING CALIFORNIA WILDFIRES AT THE LOS ANGELES TIMES

The deadly wildfires that ravaged Southern California in 2003 were the most destructive in the state's history, taking 26 lives, destroying more than 3,600 homes and causing \$2 billion in damage.

At the Los Angeles Times, 76 reporters contributed stories on the fire. As a result, "for its compelling and comprehensive coverage of the massive wildfires," the Times was awarded the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for breaking news reporting.

Geoff Mohan, one of the Times' primary reporters on the story, explains that "a wildfire is just like a war: chaotic, often incomprehensible up close, and dangerous even in its most benign moments."

The hardest part of covering a wildfire? "Fires can overcome and overwhelm you in a matter of seconds," Mohan says. "Over time, the heat and smoke leave you tired, dehydrated and in poor condition to make decisions. Every action must be calculated carefully, and has to include a viable escape route, good communication about where the fire is (and is going), and teamwork to keep lookout."

And covering a destructive fire is emotionally difficult, too. "Wildfires destroy everything down to the rims of cars, let alone cherished photographs and other mementos," Mohan says. "It is heart-rending to watch someone literally sift through the coals of their former life."

Still, Mohan says, covering a wildfire is an unforgettable experience. "Imagine being paid to witness such an awesome spectacle and in the process getting a close understanding of both human and mother nature," he says. "The ups far outweigh the downs for me."

