

OCN writing guidelines

Subject guidelines

Byline stories mainly fall under these categories:

- Meetings of government entities: these are reports of meetings that occurred within the month before publication
- Columns: Birds, Gardening, Books, Art, Weather, and Library Events. No more subjects are under consideration for columns at this time.

Other subjects considered for byline stories:

- Reviews of events: rarely—please check with John before attending an event you want to cover
- Perspective on Our Community: an occasional column by a writer providing more depth on a topic of interest or concern in our community
- Election-related articles: OCN often handles election coverage by soliciting candidates' responses to a set of questions.

What we don't write:

- Profiles of individuals. The exception is when a prominent Tri-Lakes figure retires or passes away; then we might write up something about that person.
- Follow-up stories on a topic that might arise during a meeting
- Business stories or announcements. These are handled as advertising.
- Religious events or announcements
- Political fund-raisers
- School plays or sports. These may, on occasion, be covered with a photo and caption.

Story content/writing style

The lede: Please put the most important information in the lede, which is the first sentence or paragraph of the story. Consider what the readers might think is most important. Start the article with what would be most relevant to them, and indicate why it's important if it's not obvious. Try to use interesting words and active verbs to present the lede. You don't have to put all the pertinent information in the lede's first sentence; you can spread it out over two or even three sentences. It is the writer's responsibility to determine what the lede should be.

Don't write about a meeting simply in chronological order, like minutes. Make the lede as interesting as you can. It's not necessary to say when the meeting was held in that first sentence; you can say this in the second sentence. Follow the lede with more information on that particular topic.

The rest of the article: After you've written the most important information, continue with other topics in order of importance or relevance to the community. When writing about regularly held meetings, indicate at the end of the article when and where the next meeting will be held.

With meetings, it is not necessary to report on every single thing that is discussed. We are not writing the minutes of the meetings, but we are writing more than a daily newspaper would include in an article. Use your judgment (or consult with someone on the OCN board) to determine whether or not what you're hearing is newsworthy.

Bulleted lists: If you want to note only a sentence about something that is worth mentioning briefly, you can do so in a bulleted list, but please use this method no more than twice per story (in cases where a story is very long, three bulleted lists would be okay). Use such lists to condense information into a more readable format. Don't use bulleted lists when the listed items are just a few words each. Short items usually work better in a sentence format.

Quotes: Attribute any remark to a specific person, using his or her title or professional position. Including relevant quotes helps enliven your article. Avoid saying "Joe Blow felt that..." Instead say, "Joe Blow said ..." We can't be sure what Joe felt. We only know what he said. In subsequent references, just use the person's last name. Avoid terms such as "She further indicated" or "He went on to say." Most newspapers use "said" in attributions because it is simple and direct and doesn't imply a particular state of mind of the person speaking.

If you don't have a complete quote, but you're certain of the intent and you wrote down the important words within the quote, you can use a partial quote as long as it doesn't change the meaning or tone of the person speaking. Example: Glenn said the subdivision would be a "magnificent addition" to the Monument area.

Objectivity: Be as objective as possible in news stories and feature articles. The OCN readership includes many points of view, so try not to inject your personal views (even though you know you're right!). Avoid variations of "a good time was had by all" in stories, because you really don't know that.

Headings: Break up subjects by using subheadings in articles on meetings. Try to make them meaty, not just "Other Committees" or "Miscellaneous." When possible, structure subheads like headlines.

To separate short items, use boldface subheads of a few words followed by a colon. To indicate more in-depth topics, use stand-alone bold subheads.

Put a headline on your story if you can; if not, it can be added during copyediting. Be sure to include your byline.

Writing style: Try to write using active, not passive, voice. Example:

Passive: Comments were voiced by members of the audience during the meeting.

Active: The audience voiced their comments during the meeting.

Avoid long, complex sentences; use several sentences instead. Avoid long paragraphs.

If necessary, provide concise background information to help explain complicated situations.

Make sure the spelling of names is correct; in many cases, the copyeditor has no way of knowing if the spelling is right or wrong.

It's best to write your story as soon after the meeting as possible. The more time that passes, the less you will remember the details. And it helps keep a steady flow of stories being sent to the copyeditor.

Photos and recordings

Consider taking a camera to meetings, in case an award is given or other noteworthy action occurs. Avoid using flash if possible, as it can be disruptive. Get the names of people you've photographed. OCN has a standard photo release form. It is especially important to have signed releases in order to print pictures of children in the paper.

Consider taping the meetings you attend. It helps with direct quotes and comes in handy if too much time has passed between the meeting and the time you begin writing. Avoid using tape recorders since they require frequent tape changes. OCN can provide a digital recorder if you don't have one.

Editing

Please write your article in Microsoft Word and save the file in .DOC or .RTF format. If you are using Word 2007 or later, set your preferences in Word so the files you create will be stored in one of these formats. Please don't send files in .DOCX or Open Office formats. Many people in the OCN group have older versions of Word that cannot open .DOCX without going through a converter.

As soon as you have completed your story, send it to our copyeditor, Gary Houy. He edits all stories for clarity, grammar, style, and correctness, drawing on his many years in the newspaper business and generally following Associated Press style. He will return the edited story to you as part of a block of articles, with questions in comment "balloons" within the story. Please use the correct settings in Word to view the comments. You might need to adjust the "View" setting to "Print Layout" to see all the editing and comments.

You should expect a question or two from Gary about something you've written—it's only natural. Please respond to him as quickly as possible with an answer. Please do not take edits personally—if Gary doesn't understand what you've written, chances are the general reader won't either. Gary will likely catch things you might not have thought would be an issue. That said, don't hesitate to ask Gary if you don't understand his question or if you don't agree with his edits. In the event you and Gary cannot come to agreement on an edit, please contact Susan Hindman. She'll discuss the problem with both of you and work to resolve it.

You can either send Gary an e-mail with answers to any questions, or you can make any necessary changes in the block—using “Track Changes”—and send that back to him.

Other Content

Events: If you discover at one of your meetings that a public event is going to be held that meets our criteria (below), send the event details, with phone number and/or Web site, to Judy Barnes. She will add the event to the calendar. We include events that happen in the Tri-Lakes area. Events are handled several ways:

1. **Snapshots of Our Community:** pictures of past events, with captions; occasionally a review is included in this section (usually with a photo), though we are currently reducing the number of reviews and photos of events that have passed.
2. **Special Events and Notices:** These are one-time/weekend events that are fundraisers for nonprofits; volunteer notices; and other ongoing things that are not event-oriented, such as safety programs, Santa patrol, clearing snow around mailboxes, slash and mulch, etc.
3. **Our Community Calendar:** The following is our printed policy governing entries in the community calendar section:

“Our community calendar carries listings on a space-available basis for Tri-Lakes events that are sponsored by local governmental entities and not-for-profit organizations. We include events that are open to the general public and are not religious or self-promotional in nature. If space is available, complimentary calendar listings are included, when requested, for events advertised in the current issue.”

Letters to the Editor: The following is our printed policy about letters:

“Our Community News welcomes letters to the editor on topics of general interest. The OCN editorial board has established a policy that we do not knowingly print letters that have appeared in substantially the same form elsewhere. Letters that have appeared in other publications are considered the property of those publications and governed by their copyright. OCN has adopted our policy to minimize the possibility of copyright infringement.

Please identify your submission as a letter to the editor and include your full name, home address, and day and evening phone numbers. If you send us an “open letter,” we will not consider it to be a letter to the editor unless you specifically identify it as such. Letters will not be published anonymously or with what appear to be fictitious authors’ names. A limit of 300 words is recommended. Letters may be edited for length, grammar, and accuracy.

In response to recent problems receiving e-mail, if you send your letter by e-mail, we will send an e-mail acknowledgement. If you do not receive an acknowledgement, please call 481-8511 to confirm that we have received your letter. Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in letters to our community should not be interpreted as the view of OCN even when the letter writer is a reporter for OCN.”

Public requests: Don't commit to anyone about including something in the paper. What winds up in the paper is subject to many constraints. If someone presses you, tell them, "I'll pass it along to the editorial board."

If someone is upset about something that appeared in the paper, encourage them to write a letter to the editor.