# ‘Oracle’ Approach To Reporting

**By Eric Loo, University of Wollongong, Australia**

In your daily trip to work, you pass by a temple, a mosque, a church. The locals come and go from these places of worship. As a journalist, do you see just that – people coming and going? Or do you see untold stories? Like an inquisitive child often does, you’d ask questions from what you had seen and heard: What do the locals do when they go to the temple, mosque and church? Why do they go there? How does their faith help them in their daily life and shape their reactions to things around them?

Yes, journalists are peculiar people. While others see usually mundane daily events, journalists tend to see stories. Here’s a simple flow chart to show how journalists think when they look for the hidden stories and write about them:



**REWRITE**

**FOCUS**

* Rearrange the paragraphs into blocks of related news, paraphrased speech and direct quotes.
* Clarify the lead.
* Does it take too long to tell the religion story?
* Does the religion story have a human voice?
* Does the religion story have a strong photograph?
* Is the story accurate, fair and reflects the views of different religious groups?
* Write freely from your understanding of the issue.
* Think of compelling anecdotes to introduce and humanise the religion story.
* Refer to your notes for accuracy – facts, figures, context, interviews, opinions, quotes.
* What’s the point of the religion story?
* What’s the story really about?
* How is religion relevant to the story?
* Who are involved? Who are affected?
* Why would anyone want to read the story?
* What must I include? What can I leave out?

**OBSERVE**

* Think of what your readers would most likely ask about a religion-related issue.
* Reflect on fresher angles than what have been reported.
* Be ready to change your angles with new information from your research and chat with the people.
* Understand the issues behind the religious events.

**WRITE AS YOU GO**

**FINAL COPY**

* Take a break.
* Return to your story with a fresh mind.
* Is this the best I can write?
* Why would anyone read my story to the end?
* Delete redundant information.
* Edit. Tighten the loose ends. Close the gaps.
* File the story.

**How to find and write the story**

Now that you have a flow chart, let’s get deeper into the process of finding a religion-related story and writing about it. This process is represented by the letters O R A C L E. Together they form the word ‘ORACLE’, which means “somebody or something considered to be a source of knowledge, wisdom, or prophecy”.

In the days of typewriters and hot metal press, we saw newspapers as the main ‘source of knowledge’. Journalists explained complex issues through stories that were written in a plain and simple manner and helped along by strong headlines and compelling photographs. Journalists were generally seen as sources of “knowledge” and “wisdom”. This is still somewhat true today despite consumer trends, media competition and a constant chase for advertising revenue all working to distract journalists from their primary function in plural societies.

The ORACLE model aims to show how journalists can be more proactive in breaking religion stories instead of merely reacting to events or doing follow-ups on events past. Journalists should lead rather than just follow the trends.

Proactive journalists are highly aware of changing trends. They continually think about what may happen if situations persist. They see problems. They pre-empt questions. They search for possible solutions by talking to people from across religious and racial groups and interviewing official sources. At the end of the day, they write their stories.

The ORACLE model explains this process of proactive reporting as follows:

* **O**bserve, watch and listen to make sense of events, issues and people in their respective faith communities. Here lies the capacity of journalists to perceive and see what others usually overlook. People see religious events. Journalists see stories and issues behind the religious events.
* **R**eflect on and **record** what you have observed. **Reconcile** the differences from what you have seen, heard or sensed with what you often assume about particular religious groups. Listen to your own counsel and be guided by your conscience and moral values. Then, challenge conventional wisdom with verified information – without taking sides.
* **A**mplify and **analyse** the relevant and significant aspects of the event, its religion-related issues and the people involved in the event to **agitate** for necessary actions to address and ultimately to resolve the issues.
* **C**ontextualise your analysis of the events and religion-related issues with reference to different realities faced by different religious communities. Use anecdotes to **connect** the issues with your readers. Back up these anecdotes with concrete information to **clarify** the issues. Include perspectives and explanations from people across different religious communities.
* **L**earn more about what you have observed, investigated, understood and written to distinguish truths from falsehoods. With more knowledge and experience, this will prepare you to report and write on future religion-related issues.
* **E**ducate, **enlighten**, and **enable** your readers to find out more about the issues and people you have written about. For your stories to have significant impact, you will need to work with your readers, your sources and your editors to continue your work in finding possible solutions to religious issues. You are basically a tenacious facilitator for the community, as represented by the ORACLE model on the next page.

**CONTEXTUALISE**

**Content**

**Context**

**Complexity**

**Different realities**

**AMPLIFY**

**Significance**

**Adjudicate**

**ANALYSE**

**So what? What now?**

**What if? Why? How?**

**OBSERVE**

**Hear/Listen**

**Feel**

**Smell/Taste**

**Watch/See**

**Details**

**LEARN**

**Find out more**

**Follow-ups**

**Elucidate**

**New questions, old issues**

**EDUCATE**

**REFLECT**

* **Not black and white, but shades of grey.**
* **Story frames.**
* **News values – development oriented.**

Model by Eric Loo

# The ‘FACTS’ of Proactive Reporting

The ORACLE model illustrates how you can plan your story and reflect on why you are writing the story. Now we come to the next stage – drafting the story.

This section provides a model to illustrate the process that journalists generally take when they draft their stories. The model is represented by the letters F A C T S. FACTS are fundamental to journalistic writing. The individual letters and what they represent are as follows:

Fact-check – This means checking what you have heard or are told by someone for a story. You start to look for hard evidence from published statistics, official documents, reported cases, research findings to make sure that what you have heard can be backed up by the facts.

Angle – From the information you have gathered – facts, counterfacts, opinions, claims – you decide on which aspects of the story to emphasise in the limited news space or air time to tell the story. You think of your readers, and what you feel they need to know to understand the issue. You angle your story to hook it to relevant community concerns and interests.

Contextualise – You explain the background of the story because events, issues and circumstances are usually related. A politician who makes a public statement on the importance of religious tolerance may not necessarily mean that his party policies reflect the same sentiment, just as the banning of face-coverings (niqabs) in high-security places does not necessarily mean a government is anti-Islam.

Test your theory – Like our readers, we often make assumptions about why things happen. If our assumptions turn out to be right most of the time, we may fall victim to confirmation bias. Experience shows that what we assume can sometimes turn out to be wrong. Journalists should always test their assumptions by searching for information that challenges their ‘theories’. It is as crucial to find information that confirms your ‘theory’ or assumption as it is to know when you are wrong. Test your theory. Show the evidence.

Source - This means talking to as many sources as you can access to suss out the real issues and to make sure your religion story is accurate in its facts, clear in its context, fair in its representation and responsible for consequences to people affected by your story.

# ‘FACTS’ Of Proactive Reporting

**Fact-check**

**Research**

**Verify**

**Confirm**

**Substantiate**

**Sources**

**Sussing it out**

**Multiple sourcing**

**Solutions, if any**

**Test your theory**

**Hypothesise**

**Mind-maps**

**Verify**

**Angle**

**Relevance**

**Significance**

**Currency**

**Contextualise**

**Content**

**Context**

**Complexity**

**Different realities**

Model by Eric Loo

Applying the FACTS model

Suspected ‘jihadists’ leaving their home countries to fight in Syria and Iraq have been intercepted at international airports in Malaysia, the US, the UK and Australia. These and related incidents have been widely reported, particularly the beheadings of journalists by Islamic State militants. Let’s look at how the FACTS model can be applied to reporting on these home-grown jihadists.

Fact-check: You think that there is a bigger story behind the interception of suspected jihadists at the airports. You’ve heard that there are sleeper terrorist cells around the country and that some are meeting at mosques. Your sources are willing to be quoted, but ask to remain anonymous. You start to look for evidence of these clandestine meetings. No evidence, no verified information, no story.

Angle: Homegrown terrorism is a complex issue when the public associates it with religion. In the case of Islamic State militancy, the religion is Islam. Because there are many sides to an issue, focus on the most significant aspects. Possible angles in this case include policing and public security issues. What are police and national security personnel doing to flush out homegrown IS supporters? What is causing the rise of religious extremism and radicalisation of youths across different religious groups? Write follow-up articles on what can be done to promote moderation across religious groups.

Contextualise: Newton’s third law of physics says *‘For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction’.* What you see happening in your area of reporting is connected to past and current events. Try to determine where homegrown jihadists are concentrated. What are the demographics and psychographics of thee suspected jihadists? What are their political ideologies, social backgrounds, educational levels and religious beliefs? How are they different or similar to other followers of the same religious tradition?

Theorise: It’s generally assumed that suspected jihadists and IS sympathisers are poorly educated criminal psychopaths from broken homes and dysfunctional families who have been disenfranchised from mainstream society. Intelligence reports, however, say they are generally educated middle-class millennial generation social media users, which IS militants have targeted for recruitment from the West. Instead of writing your story based on stereotypes, test your theories by checking published academic papers and government reports on terrorism and applying these to suit the purpose of your story. This brings us back to ‘E’ in the ORACLE model – clearly explain underlying issues to educate your readers.

Source: This returns us to sussing out/searching for for plausible explanations or solutions to the causes of religious extremism and radicalisation of youths in the community. Religious extremism and intolerance exist within all religious groups. Talking to authoritative sources and followers of different faiths will give your story a more contextualised and informed perspective on complex issues.

The final stage in writing, editing and filing your story is illustrated in a third model of ‘right and tight writing’ represented by the letters A B C D E.

**Brevity**

**Tight edits**

**Depth**

**Deliberative**

**Clarity**

**Choice of words, journalistic**

**expressions**

**Ethics**

**Code of practice**

**Accuracy**

**Content, Context, Facts**

**WRITE RIGHT**

**&**

**WRITE TIGHT**

* **A**ccuracy: If a writer has to pick one principle that should never be violated, this should be the one. Strive for accuracy in your facts, quotes and attributions.
* **B**revity: The question is often asked, Should I be brief and succinct in my writing or complete? By all means, be brief, but not at the expense of being complete in telling the story. Brevity is about writing tight in the active voice.
* **C**larity: Nothing is more frustrating for readers than reading an article and not understanding what they have read.
* **C**oherence: Facts should follow one another in a reasonable manner. This may be logical, chronological or by order of importance, depending on the subject. A news story should deal with one significant point. If a story has multiple newsworthy elements, consider writing several stories rather than trying to combine a mass of information into one.
* **D**epth: A story is more than a string of words and sentences arranged in logical paragraphs. A story is only as strong and credible as the content. It should dig deep into an issue and answers the ‘so what?’ question.
* **E**thics: To report news accurately and to present an impartial and unprejudiced account, you must keep yourself detached from relevant events or issues. If you forget principles of your organisation’s code of ethical practice, review them and use common sense in judging what’s right, what’s wrong, and what’s fair.