



# NewsLab Report

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## Standup Strategies

Love them or hate them, TV reporters have to do standups. There are plenty of good reasons for doing standups, some as old as television news itself. The trouble is, many standups today look no different than they did half a century ago: reporter gets in front of camera and talks.

That used to be enough. "In the beginning of network TV news, the standup close was mainly a device to establish that, by golly, a correspondent had been on the scene of the news event just reported," wrote the late Jim Snyder, who ran TV newsrooms in Washington and Detroit. A standup not only can help to establish credibility, it's a way for reporters to build a relationship with viewers, giving them a face to put with the voice. But the challenge for reporters and photographers today is to produce standups that add more to a story than "presence."

Too many standups are an afterthought, thrown together at the end of a shoot just to get something in the can. A standup should be an essential part of your narrative, adding new information and moving the story forward. A little forethought and some critical questions can make all the difference:

- Why would we want to include a standup in this story?
- What information would we convey in a standup?
- Do we have something to show or demonstrate in this standup?
- Where and when might we do this standup?
- How will the standup fit into the finished story?

Good standups obviously require close collaboration between reporter and photographer, but sometimes attitudes get in the way. Reporters who stress out about going on camera and photographers who think standups are all about ego may not communicate as well as they should, especially on deadline. So it's important to start talking through standup options well before crunch time.

Standups can be effective in explaining complicated issues or concepts, especially if you can



find a simple analogy to illustrate the point. How does a retention pond work? Kind of like a coffee filter. How do the candidates' budget plans differ? Like slices of pie at the local diner. Show-and-tell standups aren't for every story but used judiciously, they can help viewers make sense of difficult subjects.

Another way of adding visual interest to a longer standup is to shoot it in multiple takes. This allows you to walk your viewer through a complex process by illustrating individual steps in a visual sequence. To make sure you have what you need for editing purposes, it can help to create a simple storyboard in advance.

Before you shoot any standup you need a clear idea of your story structure—not a complete script but a mental outline. Sometimes, it's helpful to shoot more than one version in case that structure changes. But if you wind up with a standup that really doesn't fit, resist the temptation to use it anyway. Then promise yourself that tomorrow, you'll plan and execute a standup that really works.

# The Promise of Pacing

by Samuel Bradley and Deborah Potter

**“Producers who follow a few basic pacing rules can produce newscasts that will hold and inform their viewers.”**

It’s the TV producer’s holy grail—a newscast that keeps viewers tuned in and provides news they can understand and remember. Many producers believe that pacing is the key to a successful newscast. But what does pacing really mean, how can you achieve it, and how can you be sure it will pay off?

Preliminary results from a new research study suggest that producers who follow a few basic pacing rules can produce newscasts that will hold and inform their viewers.

The study at Indiana University compared four news programs, each about 15 minutes in length. The newscasts, from four different stations in the same market, were manipulated at NewsLab so they differed significantly on two measurements of pacing: story length and edit speed. One newscast had longer stories, and a medium edit pace; the second had longer stories and a fast edit pace; the third had shorter stories and a medium edit pace; the fourth had shorter stories and a fast edit pace.

Participants in the study were told they could watch any of the four newscasts running simultaneously, and could change channels according to their preferences using a remote control. After the screening, participants evaluated each of the newscasts they saw on seven rating scales as to whether the newscast was believable, engaging, enjoyable, informative, important, interesting and understandable. Participants then were tested to find out what they remembered from those newscasts.

When the study was conducted with younger viewers, between 18 and 22 years old, there were significant differences in how they rated the newscasts. These viewers preferred the faster paced newscasts, which might have been predicted, but perhaps surprisingly, they also gave high marks to the newscasts with longer stories. Older viewers, between 25 and 81, showed no preference among the newscasts.

Story length and edit pace also affected what participants remembered from each of the newscasts. Younger viewers retained the most information from newscasts with longer stories told at a quicker pace, and shorter stories told at a slower pace. Again, this made almost no difference to older viewers.

What’s perhaps most interesting is the difference between the two groups when it comes to channel changing. Younger viewers spent more time watching newscasts that were consistent in pacing. That is, they stayed longer on the newscast with short stories and fast edits and the newscast with long stories and slower edits. But older viewers did the opposite. While the results were not statistically significant, the older viewers seemed to prefer the newscasts with more variety, either using long stories and fast edits, or short stories and slow edits.

Researchers noted a clear pattern in viewers’ memories for information just before and just after they changed channels. Both older and younger viewers remembered less information from stories they watched just before they hit the remote control. In effect, viewers disconnected from the news content as they lost interest and couldn’t remember what they saw. After they changed the channel, they re-engaged and their performance on memory tests improved.

Results from this multi-faceted study are still being analyzed, but what’s been learned so far has implications for newsrooms seeking to hold viewers’ attention while helping them remember what they’ve seen. Pacing and story length seemed to have little influence over older viewers’ preferences and memories. Younger viewers, on the other hand, both preferred and remembered more information from the newscast with longer stories told at a quicker pace. The results suggest that this kind of newscast could hold younger viewers without alienating the core group of older viewers who make up the loyal local news audience.

*Samuel Bradley is a doctoral student at Indiana University.*

**References**

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- Further analysis of this research will examine when and why viewers change channels.
- Contact Samuel Bradley at sambradl@indiana.edu

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# Surviving the Drive

by Jim Garrott, WEEK-TV, Peoria, IL

Central Illinois is facing four years of road construction on the main artery through our viewing area that will inconvenience travelers and businesses alike. It is the largest project outside of Chicago ever attempted in the state. Our newsroom understands how important it is to be the place for viewers to turn to on this story, but we felt we needed help to do our best.

We asked NewsLab to put together a Lab Days workshop for us on covering highway construction. Reporter Kathy Topp and photographer Doug Smith went to Washington for two days with the hope of getting some ideas they could pass along to the entire newsroom. They came back with more than they ever expected.

**First suggestion:** Brand the coverage. We started by canvassing the building for an appropriate title. A promotions person suggested “Survive The Drive” rather than the Department of Transportation’s “Upgrade 74.” Every story done in the last six months has been titled this way. **Second suggestion:** Offer more than on-air coverage. We immediately brought our Webmaster into the fold and built a special page with information and links on the project. There is a button on our front page and each story we do on air links people to it. **Third suggestion:** Look back and look ahead. Within a few weeks after our crew’s return from Washington, the governor was scheduled to come to Peoria to kick off the project. We gave the crew several days to focus on this story. They spent a whole day videotaping areas where the work would

be done and talking to people. They found an engineer who helped to build the original highway 50 years ago. His story, including historic film, was just one of the stories we aired on kickoff day.

In December, we mounted a camera overlooking the bridge that will be closed for six months as well as a section of the highway. We’ll be streaming that video to our website when the construction hits that area. We’re now working with the Illinois Department of Transportation to tie into the cameras they will install this spring to monitor other parts of the project so we can use that video as well.

In the meantime, a number of our reporters and photographers have found interesting stories about businesses and individuals affected by the project. We have developed a list of people who are willing to let us follow them periodically throughout the project to tell how it impacts them.

We had thought of some of these ideas in advance of our work with NewsLab. But Lab Days helped us focus and gave us more ideas to go further with this project than we thought possible. Several other “pie in the sky” options are already being worked on, and I am confident they will come to fruition. I know we could not have done it without the help of NewsLab.



## Trade Tips

The multi-layered graphics that most cable news networks are using these days appear to make it more difficult for viewers to understand and remember what they see. Preliminary results of a NewsLab study found that the weather reports, sports scores, and news headlines that appear on the screen along with the news anchor require viewers to do more mental work. This makes it harder for them to understand the stories the news anchors report. The added “attentional demand” on viewers, brought on by the visual complexity on the screen, also appears to lower viewers’ retention of story facts.

The study, conducted at Kansas State University, presented some viewers with the standard CNN Headline News format, and measured attentional demand as well as memory for story facts. A separate group of viewers was shown the same news stories without the graphics. The video was electronically manipulated so that only the anchor was seen on screen, eliminating the visual complexity that usually accompanies a Headline News presentation. The version that contained only the news anchor required less viewer effort to watch and resulted in better comprehension of story facts. NewsLab and Kansas State are now working on a follow-up study to measure the magnitude of the memory retention problem.



# NewsLab CD: Tools for TV Journalists

If you're on the Internet, it's easy to take advantage of NewsLab's many resources for television newsrooms. Thousands of journalists visit our Web site every month to do just that. But what if you're not connected?

Now, there's a way to have NewsLab at your fingertips, even offline. Our new CD, *Tools for TV Journalists*, includes a wealth of useful information from tip-sheets to research results.



as backgrounders for journalists covering aviation, business, the military and police beats. There are tips on dealing with sources from kids to victims. News managers will find suggestions to help them assess job candidates, improve the morning meeting, and develop disaster coverage plans, plus many other newsroom tools and checklists. In the research section, you'll find the results of NewsLab studies on TV audiences, storytelling, and accuracy.

Interactive videos let you deconstruct two television news stories to learn what works best for viewers. One story examines how to enliven political coverage by looking at a campaign issue through the eyes of someone directly affected, someone who is an unofficial expert. The other looks at how to structure stories so the video and sound bites reveal surprises, making those stories more memorable.

The CD also contains strategies for telling specific types of stories, like consumer and technology reports, as well

*Tools for TV Journalists* is a portable toolkit anyone can use on any CD-equipped PC, in the field or in the newsroom, no Internet connection or special software required. We hope you'll find it just as indispensable as NewsLab itself.

Contact us at  
[mail@newslab.org](mailto:mail@newslab.org)  
to request a copy of the NewsLab CD  
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