

Courtroom Journalist Tips for Writing a Mock Trial News Article

1. **Write a good headline.** A good headline draws the reader's attention. Your headline should be specific enough to let the reader know what your article is about by summing up the story in as few words as possible. The headline also needs to be accurate. You do not want your reader to feel misled or let down by the headline.
2. **Write from the third-person point of view.** The journalist should NOT be part of the article. You are not writing about yourself. Do not include your own thoughts, opinions, or analysis. A journalist tells a story objectively, presenting facts in a straightforward, unbiased way that allows the readers to decide for themselves what they think of the situation.
3. **Start your article with a strong lede.** Your article should have an opening that grabs the readers' attention and makes them want to read the rest. Journalists call this "the lede". The lede is a strong summary of events that hooks the reader from the start. The lede should contain essential information about the story by answering the five W's: who, what, where, when, and why. Try to answer these questions in the first one or two sentences of your article. For example: "At 4:00 p.m. yesterday, a Rockvale County jury awarded retired school teacher Alex Hite five million dollars in a harassment lawsuit against WBAD talk radio host Cam Porter, ending a highly publicized, seven-year legal battle that divided the community." The lede should tell the reader what the article is about but also encourage the reader to keep reading to learn more.
4. **Structure your article logically.** Present the information in order of importance. The most important information is summarized at the beginning. The body of the article should relay details in chronological order. The end should contain extra information that might be of interest, including any events that might unfold in the future: "An angry Porter left the courtroom vowing to appeal "all the way to the US Supreme Court, if necessary.""
5. **Keep your article simple, concise, and clear.** Use short, plain, direct sentences in subject-verb-object format. Use the active voice and not the passive voice, such as "Alex Hite wrote a complaint letter to WBAD's program director" not "A letter of complaint was written to WBAD's program director by Alex Hite." The active voice is more direct, is easier to read and understand, and often makes for shorter sentences.
6. **Report truthfully and accurately.** Make sure everything you say is true. This requires that you research your topic in advance. In reporting about a court case, this means reading the pleadings and other court filings before the trial. You must also take detailed notes during the trial so that you can accurately recall what transpired when it is time to write your article.

7. **Cite to sources.** If you are reporting a fact that is not confirmed or might be disputed, indicate where your information came from. For example: “According to the lawsuit, Hite was ridiculed by her co-workers after Porter mocked her repeatedly on his morning talk show. Hite claims she was forced to take early retirement as a result of mental stress at work attributed to Porter’s alleged campaign of harassment.” If you leave off the citations to the sources, your reporting will not be unbiased and balanced.
8. **Approach the topic seriously.** While court cases might be filled with dramatic moments, you should maintain a serious tone. Let the facts and quotes relay the drama of the events, rather than your writing style. Avoid injecting superfluous and sensational adjectives and adverbs. For example: “At one point, the judge threatened Hite’s attorney with contempt of court after she pointed at Porter during her cross-examination and shouted, “You, sir, are a liar!”” Instead of: “The jury watched in great surprise as Hite’s attorney aggressively approached a startled Porter and called him a liar right in the middle of his testimony! The judge got so mad, his face turned purple, and he angrily told the attorney that if she pulled a stunt like that again, he would throw her in jail!” A news article is not a novel.
9. **Use quotes.** Including quotes from people involved in the story provides different perspectives and helps you keep the story balanced. Using quotes also helps you stay in the role of an outside observer. In courtroom reporting, the best quotes come from the testimony of witnesses. Sometimes, an attorney’s “gotcha” question or the judge’s statement in ruling on a legal issue can bring the article to life. In a real courtroom and in Mock Trial, journalists are not allowed to record the trial without the permission of the judge. Good notetaking is essential because you do not want to misquote anyone. If you don’t catch the exact words, you can rephrase or paraphrase, just make sure it is an accurate representation of what the person said.
10. **Edit and proofread your work.** All writers must double-check spelling and edit their work for clarity and content. Read and re-read your article before turning it in. Try reading it out loud to yourself to make sure it makes sense. Correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation are essential for relaying a news story accurately, keeping the reader’s attention, and ensuring your credibility as a journalist. Proofread carefully to ensure you write in complete sentences; have subject-verb agreement; avoid run-on sentences; use apostrophes, commas, and capitalization appropriately; etc. Keep an eye out for homophones – words that sound alike but are spelled differently. An attorney is ‘counsel’ not ‘council’, for example. If you are not sure about a grammar rule, look it up in a style manual, such as *Elements of Style*, *Associated Press Stylebook*, or *Chicago Manual of Style*.