

Handout: Updating Online Copy

Deb Halpern Wenger, Virginia Commonwealth University

In breaking or developing news situations, more news organizations than ever before are relying on their Web sites to handle continuous updates - for journalists that means getting used to the idea of "incremental reporting." Anyone who has ever used the Associated Press wire service has seen great examples of incremental reporting in action.

Incremental reporting can be defined as reporting a story as a series of developments.

As you work to update stories in this way, it's important to keep these three things in mind:

- **New info up top.** Get new information into the first sentence whenever possible. It should be clear to someone coming back to the story that you've updated the copy.
- **Tell the time.** Time references help give online stories a sense of urgency. If something happened "late this afternoon," then say that. If you're posting at 4 p.m. and the court hearing was at 3 p.m. today, mention that in the story. (One word of caution – be sure you or someone else will be checking time references later so the story doesn't still say "3 p.m. today" when the story is a day old.)
- **Put it in perspective.** Be sure to provide enough background for the first time reader. Sometimes the "new" information pushes the context so far down that the story no longer makes sense. (For example, if you report the expected cuts in higher education but don't mention the next day's budget announcement, readers may not realize the education cuts are just a part of the story.)

News organizations all across the country are trying to become true 24/7 operations online. That means getting news posted as quickly as it can be confirmed and updating stories as frequently as possible.

This new approach requires a change in the journalist's mindset. The traditional practice of completing a TV story first and only then starting to produce content for the Web is no longer an option in many newsrooms.