

DOING RESEARCH: TALK, READ, GO

Veteran journalist Jon Wells talks about how he conducts research for an article

When the winter holidays rolled around a couple of years ago, journalist Jon Wells' editor asked him to write an article about "happiness."

At first, the assignment sounded easy. Everyone knows about happiness, right? But, "happiness is a massive topic," says Wells. He needed to think up a good angle on it—one that would interest and engage readers.

Wells decided to write an "analysis" or "think" piece, a type of news essay that looks at a subject from many different angles. To do that, he needed to gather as much information as possible about the subject.

"My process for any story (is): who can I talk to, what can I read, and where can I go?" says Wells. In other words, he finds experts to interview, reads articles and books about the subject, and thinks about places he could visit that would help him write about happiness.

In more than 22 years as a journalist for the Hamilton Spectator, Wells has developed a long list of experts he can interview about many different subjects. One of



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them, a retired church minister, "gave me a great quote: Happiness is emotion; joy is deeper."

Wells also used a website called ProfNet, which puts journalists in touch with people who are experts in certain subjects. Then he Googled "happiness" as well as the phrase, "happiness is not what it used to be." Using

that phrase helped him get a "mountain of information," he said. One of the things that came up in that search was that March 20 is the International Day of Happiness.

"I ended up using that as my lede (opening paragraph)," says Wells.

Right after he got the assignment, Wells started jotting down ideas about it in a



"...happiness is not what it used to be."

folder he has on his computer, labelled "Thoughts." He made a note of anything he knew about happiness. For instance, how the US Declaration of Independence mentions people's right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." And how happiness can be a state of mind.

Wells calls this stage of research, "hunting and gathering."

Wells had read a book called *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, and "I remembered it had something about happiness." Finally, Wells searched articles from his own newspaper, to see what other reporters had written about happiness. He found a *Hamilton Spectator* article about

Jen Harvey, a "happiness coach." He sent her a message on Facebook, and later interviewed her over the phone.

Wells had watched an animated movie called *"Inside Out,"* which featured a girl's emotions as the main characters—particularly Joy, who was very happy. From that movie, he used the insight that, "sad and happy are two sides of the same coin, and you can't have one without the other."

Lastly, he used his own point-of-view and even things that had happened to him that had affected his own happiness, such as a time when his daughter had an operation. Recalling her courage during that time inspired his "heart to swell with joy forever."

After he had done his reading, thinking and research (for this story, he decided there was no "place" that would help him write about happiness), it was time to write the article. It took him about two weeks from start to finish, which is much longer than journalists typically have to write an article.

"It's great to have the time, but it's pressure, too—it has to be strong. I have the luxury of time so it had better be strong," he remembers thinking.

Wells' editor liked the piece. On Dec. 24, after she had read a draft, she wrote Wells an email: "It's a lovely story. It is funny and smart (*Sapiens!*) and sweet (*Inside Out*). And sad... Very thoughtful read."



JOURNALISM 101

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As mentioned in the article, Jon Wells' system for research involves three areas:

TALK

Who can he talk to (or interview)? Many journalists talk to university professors, because they usually focus on a particular field and know a lot of very up-to-date information about it. For instance, psychology or sociology professors might be good to interview on the subject of "happiness." Authors are also excellent sources, because of the large amount of research they will have done to write their book about a specific topic. Journalists also talk to people who have been involved in some way in what they're writing about. For instance, for a story about a forest fire, a journalist could interview someone who lives near the area.

READ

Books, newspaper articles, and scientific journals are excellent sources of information for news articles. Journalists take care to check the origin of any written material they use, to make sure the person who wrote it really is an expert in it. Many journalists use polls and

studies, and must take extra care to determine whether the poll or study has been done scientifically or is just "anecdotal."

GO

An article can often be enhanced with details about the location where the event being reported on takes place. For instance, for an article about a forest fire, a journalist would likely want to (assuming it's safe) visit the fire scene and then describe it, using as many details as possible. That helps the reader picture it in their mind and could help them better understand the article.

DIG DEEPER LINKS TO LEARN MORE

Read Jon Wells' article
about happiness

READ IT!

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Listen to his discussion about it
on the Hamilton Spectator's
podcast, "The Message"

LISTEN TO IT!



DID YOU KNOW?

The article mentions Jon Wells' "lede." That's a journalism term that refers to the first line or paragraph of an article that usually contains the most important or interesting thing. When a writer has put the most important or interesting fact too far down in the story, she has "buried the lede."

Interestingly, lede is spelled "lede" to distinguish it from the "lead" that typesetters used to insert between lines when they set newspapers.



EDUCATION CONNECTION

HAPPINESS FROM ALL SIDES

Discuss! Since Jon Wells wrote his "happiness" article in 2016, some things have changed. For instance, "hygge" and "lagom" have become popular with people seeking contentment and happiness. If it was written today, what else could Wells' article include? What books, movies, experts or places would you refer to, when researching happiness?

Check it out! Look up the words hygge and lagom.

Investigate! Wells' article mentions The Happiness Project and a "happiness coach." Who started the Happiness Project, and what is it? What does a happiness coach do?