COSMOS
Navigate the Compliance Universe

Creating Great Compliance Training in a Digital World
1 Principle 1: Focus on What the Law Means, Not What the Law Says

Lawyers are comfortable with large amounts of technical detail. Most learners are not.

First, Identify What Matters

Before you start any piece of good writing, first determine *what* you're writing *about*.

This wasn't something I immediately understood as an aspiring journalist. At 22, no one had told me yet that article pitches weren't like term paper assignments. You know: "Read Madame Bovary and write a ten-page essay. If you like, focus on middle-class conventions and the myth of progress."

I am sorry to say I wasted lots of editors' time with vague, poorly-defined pitches like: "I want to explore the role of women in TV."

I figured I would start doing research *after* I got the assignment. I thought that part of my research would involve finding the actual story hiding behind my overarching (and awesome) theme, along with the colorful characters who would no doubt just show up and provide one quotable quip after another.

What I didn't know is that seasoned journalists know they need to know the story—or at least its basic contours—before they pitch.

Because while there's a lot of interesting, remarkable, unusual, or shocking stuff going on in the world, not everything that happens will cohere into a good story with sympathetic or at least quotable characters.

Also, things that are interesting to *you* are not necessarily interesting to anyone else.

(When I worked at *City Pages* in Minneapolis, there was a running joke at our pitch meetings about a Bigfoot story that one of the writers was dying to write and none of the editors cared about.)

Good journalists ask themselves:

- What am I writing about?
- What's actually interesting or new here?
- Does the story touch on bigger themes—maybe a conversation our society is having with itself?
- Are there good anecdotes to illustrate what I am trying to show?
- Who are the people involved and can they carry a story?

In compliance training, knowing what to write about doesn't seem like a problem—*at first*.

In fact, when you sit down to work on a compliance training course, *WHAT* to write about can seem blindingly obvious.

After all, you probably have a Code of Conduct that spells out requirements in this area.

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You might have a raft of policies and procedures that go into even more detail.

And, of course, there's a whole legal framework behind those corporate documents—legal definitions, requirements, case law—plus what you've learned from calls to your helpline, incoming employee questions, or internal investigations into situations where employees have gotten this badly wrong.

If you are a subject matter expert, you can likely talk for hours about the intricacies of the subject—what the law requires, where corporate practice has settled, how the law varies between jurisdictions where the company does business, how a global company handles those variances.

This is a lot of knowledge. And it is great source material. But it is not yet your story.

It is not what you are writing *about*.

In putting a story together, journalists focus on something called "the lede." Technically speaking, the lede is your opening paragraph, the part of the story that spells out the who-what-when-where-why and what's at stake.

But the lede is also more than that.

John McPhee, the great long-form magazine writer, once said that a good lede is like a flashlight shining down into the story.

The lede is what your story is *about*. It sets your story's direction. It communicates a point of view on what matters. It's a container that shapes everything that follows.

Journalism professor Tony Rogers has written about an exercise he does where he asks his class to write a news article based on the following facts:

> "A doctor is giving a speech about fad diets and physical fitness to a group of local businesspeople. Midway through his speech, the good doctor collapses of a heart attack. He dies en route to the hospital."[1]

The news angle here seems obvious: A health expert collapsed and died unexpectedly, which significantly undermined his expertise! Man bites dog (as journalists say)!

And yet, every year, more than one student will turn in a news article draft that skips the interesting part in favor of dry facts:

"Dr. Wiley Perkins gave a speech to a group of businesspeople yesterday about the problems with fad diets."

Journalists call this "burying the lede." The person who does this gets lost in the details and facts and misses what's actually important.

In compliance training, we do our own form of burying the lede.

It usually happens when we get caught up in faithfully noting all the details and caveats and writing long "including but not limited to" bulleted lists . . . and miss the big picture of what we're actually trying to communicate.

So, what is your training ***about***?

It's not about ***the law***. While your material has to be grounded in the law, that's not specific enough.

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It's not about ***the rules***. The rules aren't interesting to most people, though at least that's getting closer to what your audience needs.

If you want even a chance of being relevant and engaging, your training needs to focus not on the law or the rules, but instead on what those things ***mean***, specifically for your particular audience.

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