

THE JOURNALIST'S GUIDE TO GUN VIOLENCE COVERAGE

Guns are a sad fact of life in American culture and are a constant topic in modern journalism. A good Journalist has a duty to get involved and make a difference in this important societal debate. By following certain guidelines, the concerned Journalist can be assured of having the maximum impact on this shameful problem. The concepts discussed here apply to both broadcast and print media. For the purposes of this guide our work is divided into routine stories about gun violence and coverage of the political debate about gun control. They are both equally important. Let us first address the proper way to construct a news story involving common gun crimes . . .

COMMON GUN CRIME STORIES

The purpose of routine gun crime coverage is to create the impression of a continuing, growing and terrifying tidal wave of gun violence. Your goal is to plant the fear of guns in the minds of ordinary people, fear for themselves and especially for their children.

The first and most critical principle to remember is that subtle use of terminology can influence the reader. For example, when describing a gun crime, victims must be shot "by" a gun, not "with" a gun. This may seem like a small detail, but it helps establish the principal that guns are responsible for crime.

We would all love to cover the big ones: those mass shootings that really get the 24-hour news cycle humming and our faces on screen during times of gut-wrenching emotion. Unfortunately, most shootings involve only one victim, but this should not discourage a talented Journalist. There are ways to make even the

smallest shooting incident serve the greater good.

When telling the story, adjectives should always be chosen for maximum anti-gun effect. When describing a gun, attach terms like "automatic," "semi-automatic," "large caliber," "deadly," "high powered," or "powerful". Small pistols can be called "cheap" or "concealable." Almost any gun can be described by one or more of these terms. More than two guns should be called an "arsenal".

Try to include the term "assault weapon" if at all possible. This can be combined with any of the terms above for best results. Nobody actually knows what an assault weapon is, so you cannot be criticized for this usage. A brief visit to the [web site of a national anti-gun organization](#) can provide you with a list of the latest talking points and propaganda terms like these old classics: "[junk guns](#)," "[Saturday Night Specials](#)," "[cop-killer bullets](#)" and "the criminal's [weapon of choice](#)". If we control the terminology, we control the debate.

These days it's important to include the size of a gun's magazine. If you don't know, just call it a "high-capacity clip." The type of ammunition used is fair game too. Hollow point bullets sound especially sinister.

Don't worry about getting technical details right. You don't need to know anything specific about guns. Many a reporter has accidentally written about semi-automatic revolvers or committed other minor factual errors. Since most people know little about guns themselves, this isn't a problem. Only the gun nuts will complain and they can be easily dismissed. The visceral impact of your article is much more important than any specific factual details, since people are more easily [influenced through their emotions](#) than through logic.

Broadcast Journalists should have stock video on hand showing a machine gun firing on full automatic. Run this video while describing "automatic" weapons used in a crime or when a gun is confiscated by police. At the least, a large graphic of a handgun should be displayed behind the on-air personality when reading any crime story, even if guns are not involved.

Don't waste words describing criminals who use guns to commit crimes. Instead of calling them burglar, rapist, murderer, or repeat offender, simply use the term "gunman". This helps the public associate all forms of crime and violence with the presence of guns.

Whenever drug dealers are arrested, guns are usually confiscated by the police and this is ripe for exploitation. Mention the type and number of guns more prominently than the type and quantity of drugs. Include the number of rounds of ammunition seized, since the number will seem large to those who know little about firearms. You may simply call them "bullets" if your editor prefers that you dumb down your stories for your particular audience. If possible, find a way to imply that each round could have resulted in a dead child had the police not intervened. Obviously, the drug dealers who had the guns should be referred to as "gunmen".

Never question the effectiveness of gun control laws or proposals. Guns are, by their nature, evil and kill people. Removing guns from society can only be good. No one really uses guns for legitimate self-defense purposes, especially women or children. Any stories about armed self-defense must be minimized or suppressed where possible.

Be careful about criticizing the police for [responding slowly](#) to 911 calls for help. It's best if the public feels the police can be relied upon to protect them at all times. If people are buying guns to

protect their families, you're probably not doing your job.

Emphasize stories where people kill family members and/or themselves with guns. It is important to make the public feel like they could lose control and start killing at any moment if they have a gun in the house. Any story where a child misuses a gun is front page material.

View every shooting as opportunity. Always include emotional quotes from the victim's family if possible. If they aren't available, the perpetrator's family will do nicely. The quote must blame the tragedy on the easy availability of guns rather than any bad decisions by the perpetrator. Photos or video of grieving family members are worth a thousand facts. Most people will accept the assertion that guns cause crime. It is much easier than believing that some people deliberately choose to harm others.

Your story should include terms like "tragic" or "preventable" and mention the current toll of gun violence in your particular city or state. Good reporters always know exactly how many gun deaths have occurred in their area since the first of the year. To increase the impact of these numbers, include accidents and suicides in this total, even if your story is about intentional murders. List two or three of the most shocking recent incidents to give the impression of a continuing crime wave.

As you know, cities with the strictest gun control laws usually have the highest crime rates. If you work in one of these markets, it's critical that you focus the blame for gun crime on weapons illegally transported from other cities and states with weak gun laws. You may embellish this concept by stating that most crime guns are purchased at gun shows in those states and flow into your area in a virtual "[iron river](#)". Include the fact that criminals are able to buy all sorts of weapons, including machine guns, at

gun shows without undergoing background checks.

Little space should be devoted to shootings where criminals kill each other. Although these deaths pad the annual gun violence numbers, they distract from the basic mission of urging law abiding citizens to give up their guns. Don't dig too deeply into the reasons behind these shootings. The fact that a gun was involved should be the major point of emphasis unless someone under 18 is affected, in which case the child angle is of equal importance.

One detail that is often overlooked is the model of the gun used to kill someone. Get this information from the police and do an Internet search for other crimes involving the same model. This is how gun bans are born and your reporting can be a part of it.

Any article about gun violence should include quotes from anti-gun organizations or politicians who are promoting their latest idea for the next new gun control law. One quote should say that we must do something "for the children". If a proposed gun law might be seen as ineffective, include the comment, "If it saves only one life, it's worth it."

THE POLITICAL DEBATE

The ongoing public debate about the role of guns and gun laws in society has remained at a high level since the 1960's. Although many restrictive laws have been enacted, it's important to make people believe otherwise. It is also good to imply that little debate has been going on at all when we should be having a "national conversation about guns." Make your audience believe that the gun lobby has never given up anything. The pro-gun control side just wants reasonable compromise and an honest dialogue. There is an old saying, "What is mine is mine, but what is yours is negotiable," that's a helpful axiom. You can also study the

negotiating tactics of North Korea for additional perspective in this area.

[Mainstream Journalism](#) mounted a massive and courageous attack on the gun lobby after the Sandy Hook massacre in December, 2012. By coordinating with our sources in government and the gun safety groups, we were able to facilitate the largest gains in two decades. One reason for this success is that we have finally overthrown the old concept that Journalists should at least appear to be unbiased.

Corporate media managers have found that conducting on-air interviews with gun lobbyists boosts ratings, so if you work on air, you must be prepared for [this kind of confrontation](#). Always refer to these organizations as part of "the gun lobby". When talking to them on the air, give free reign to your feelings. Don't worry about appearing condescending and self-righteous. In the current climate, it's considered acceptable to shout and call them names.

Do not let representatives of the gun lobby confuse you with facts or engage you in an actual discussion. Since you've ended up in this business, you're probably aware that you're not the [sharpest tool in the shed](#). Have your list of anti-gun talking points in front of you. If you must improvise, stick to the most emotional statements and questions you can think of. Children should be mentioned in every other sentence. Don't ever admit that any of their facts are correct. Just move on to your next talking point without the slightest affirmation.

This is no time for honesty. For example, it's recommended that you state at the outset that you believe in the Second Amendment. You can even say that you've owned a gun yourself. Media analysts believe that this gives you more credibility with the public, as long as you sound sincere and, of course, that's what

you do for a living.

The National Rifle Association should be a primary target of your talking points. A great deal of work has gone into [nurturing a general hatred of this organization](#). Although the NRA isn't among the top campaign contributors, you should always mention “NRA money” whenever discussing how they influence politicians. Their lobbying efforts should be described as "arm twisting" or "threatening".

Gun owners must never be portrayed in a positive light. Do not mention that these individuals may actually be well-educated or have respectable jobs and normal families. They should be called "gun nuts" if you can get away with it or simply gun owners, at best. Mention details about their clothing, especially if they are wearing hunting clothes or camouflage. Note any simplistic slogans on their bumper stickers to show that their intelligence level is low. Many gun owners drive pickup trucks, hunt and live in rural areas. Use these details to help portray them as the ignorant rednecks they are.

Don't be afraid to interview these people, they are harmless even though we portray them as a menace to society. Try to solicit comments that can be creatively edited to show them in a negative light. Gun shows are excellent venues for this kind of journalism. Many in the business refer to this as “bumpkin hunting.” You will not be allowed to conduct interviews inside a gun show, but the parking lot may be available. Try to interview only white males over age 50 who sound and look unintelligent. Make them look ridiculous, especially when they talk about gun ownership as a barrier to tyranny. Find ways to blame them for the gun violence in the inner cities. Never show or refer to any gun owners who are women, minorities or might be perceived by your audience as liberals.

Feel secure in your advocacy journalism. The vast majority of [your fellow Journalists](#) support your activism. Simply being an urban, Journalist makes you one of the elite in the eyes of your readership and people will generally let you guide them.

The nation will be a better place when only the police and military have guns. Remember that since you're doing it for the children, for the greater good, the end justifies the means.