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Writing the News, Righting the Craft: A Study of News Writing Issues and Practices of Cagayan State University Lal-lo Campus Journalists

Benmar B. Torres

Cagayan State University-Aparri Campus, Aparri, Cagayan, Philippines

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***Corresponding author:** Benmar B. Torres

Abstract

This qualitative case study examined the stylistic and structural issues and writing practices of campus journalists at Cagayan State University-Lal-lo, focusing on news articles produced by the members of its official student publication. Particularly, it analyzed difficulties in headline, lead, body organization, and attribution structures. Using purposive sampling, 21 campus journalists participated in writing tasks, interviews, and focus group discussions. Data from evaluators' feedback, writing outputs, and transcripts were analyzed through thematic analysis. Findings revealed recurring issues such as lack of clarity and focus in headlines, incomplete and wordy leads, disorganized body structure, and weak or inconsistent attribution. These problems were rooted in difficulties in identifying key information, organizing ideas logically, and maintaining a consistent news angle. Mechanical errors and limited mastery of journalistic conventions further affected writing quality. Despite these challenges, the campus journalists demonstrated adaptive practices, including reliance on feedback, modeling, peer support, digital resources, and continuous writing practice. It can be concluded, therefore, that while campus journalists possess foundational knowledge of news writing, they struggle with its consistent application. Their difficulties are interconnected and require systematic intervention. It is recommended that institutions implement structured, continuous, and practice-oriented training programs, supported by mentorship, regular feedback, and adequate resources. Strengthening editorial systems and institutional support is also essential to enhance the campus journalists' competence and ensure the production of quality journalistic outputs.

Keywords: news writing, campus journalists, structural issues, writing practices, campus journalism

A. Introduction

Journalism plays a vital role in society by delivering accurate, relevant, and timely information that supports informed decision-making. In educational contexts, this role is reinforced by Republic Act No. 7079, or the Campus Journalism Act of 1991, which recognizes campus publications as venues for free expression and

responsible journalism. Section 4 highlights their contribution to developing students' ethical values, critical thinking, and civic awareness. Similarly, UNESCO (2021) stresses that media and information literacy enables learners to evaluate information critically and engage actively in democratic processes.

Despite these advantages, campus journalists often face challenges due to limited structured training and inadequate context-specific writing resources. Maxilom-Mangompit (2022) identified gaps in editing and leadership skills among campus journalists, which affect output quality. Tura (2025) also reported inconsistencies in the implementation of journalism programs in the Philippines, leading to uneven application of journalistic standards. Furthermore, reports from the Society of Professional Journalists and Poynter Institute (2025) highlight limited access to mentorship and training opportunities.

Literature emphasizes that writing skills improve through continuous practice and exposure. Student media environments help shape understanding of ethical and accurate reporting (Alaqabawy, 2025), while consistent writing practice enhances proficiency (Crossley & Kim, 2022). Digital tools support idea organization and grammar improvement (Silva et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022), although excessive reliance on AI may weaken critical thinking (Febriantoro et al., 2025). Experiential learning, such as internships, also strengthens writing competence (Isnaniah et al., 2024; Nepomuceno & Mangindra, 2025).

However, recurring issues persist, including weak organization, unclear leads, grammatical errors, and improper sourcing (Maxilom-Mangompit, 2022; Tura, 2025; Gamboa, 2019; Pacaldo, 2019). These problems reduce clarity, credibility, and audience engagement. At Cagayan State University Lal-lo Campus, campus journalists similarly struggle with organizing content, crafting leads, and integrating sources. Training efforts often focus on competition participants, limiting broader skill development.

To address these gaps, this study examined the structural and stylistic issues and practices of campus journalists in news writing. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What stylistic and structural issues are present in the the campus journalists' news articles based on evaluators' feedback, interviews, and focus group discussions, in terms of?
 - a. Headline Structure
 - b. Lead Structure
 - c. Overall Body/Organization Structure
 - d. Attribution/Referential Structure
2. What are the news writing training practices of the campus journalists based on their interviews and focus group discussions?

B. Methodology

This section presents the methodology employed in the study, outlining the systematic procedures and approaches used to gather and analyze data. It describes the research design, participants, instruments, data collection procedures, and methods of data analysis, ensuring that the study is conducted in a rigorous and ethical manner. Through this methodological framework, the researcher aims to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings while addressing the research objectives effectively.

Research Design

This study adopted a Qualitative Case Study Design, as it primarily sought to explore and understand the structural and stylistic issues and practices of campus journalists in news writing within Cagayan State University Lal-lo Campus official student publication, *The Innovator*. While previous studies focused on limited quantitative support (rubric scores) used to describe

performance levels, the main emphasis of this study was on qualitative data derived from evaluators' feedback, interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs). This design enabled an in-depth analysis of recurring Issues and allowed the development of a context-based training framework.

Locale of the Study

The study was conducted at CSU Lal-lo Campus, one of the satellite campuses of Cagayan State University, Cagayan, Philippines. Known for its agricultural focus, particularly coffee-based projects, the campus also has a rich cultural background and diverse student population that may shape student journalism themes and styles. It maintains an active student publication, named *The Innovator*, that serves as a training ground for aspiring journalists covering campus and community events.

Participants

Using purposive sampling, 21 campus journalists (9 males and 12 females, aged 18 to 21) were selected from 59 members of the publication, for the school year 2025-2026, based on the following criteria: involvement in news writing, participation in the JOURNALink seminar (the yearly student publication-led journalism training, engagement in the English category, and provision of informed consent. All participants took part in interviews and FGDs to capture a wide range of experiences.

Research Instruments

The study utilized: (1) an analytic rubric to guide the evaluation of news articles (serving mainly as a descriptive support tool), (2) evaluators' written feedback as primary qualitative data, (3) a semi-structured interview guide, and (4) coding sheets for thematic analysis. These instruments were validated by three experts in journalism and research, all of which are holding Master's and Doctorate degrees, journalism trainers, and experienced school paper advisers.

Data Gathering Procedure

After securing institutional approval and informed consent, participants completed a one-hour news writing task. Their outputs served as primary documents for analysis. This was followed by semi-structured interviews and FGDs to explore their writing processes, challenges, and training needs. Three expert raters reviewed the outputs and provided detailed feedback.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2019). News articles, evaluators' comments, and interview/FGD transcripts were coded to identify recurring issues and emerging themes. Triangulation of these sources ensured credibility and depth of analysis, forming the basis for the proposed training framework.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed an established ethical standard for handling textual and participant data, with approval from the Cagayan State University Institutional Ethics Review Board. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature, with the right to withdraw anytime. Informed consent was obtained prior to interviews and focus group discussions. Confidentiality was ensured through pseudonyms and secure data storage, with no impact on academic standing. No identifiable information was disclosed, and participation involved minimal risk. To address potential researcher bias, three external experts evaluated outputs, participants validated interpretations, and an audit trail ensured transparency and credibility.

C. Results and Discussion

This section presents the results and discussion of the study, highlighting the key findings derived from the data analysis and providing their corresponding interpretations. It examines the results in relation to the research objectives and existing literature, offering insights into their implications and significance. Through this discussion, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the issues investigated and to support evidence-based conclusions

Common Stylistic and Structural Issues in News Writing

Headline Writing Issues

Table 1 indicates the major themes that reveal the issues in news writing of campus journalists. A major issue is the **lack of clarity and focus**. Evaluators noted that many headlines were vague or lacked a strong angle, while the campus journalists themselves admitted difficulty in being specific and ensuring that their headlines clearly reflect the content. This suggests that the problem goes beyond wording and relates to uncertainty in identifying the main point of the story. Supporting this, Flores and Uy (2020) observed that students often struggle with selecting appropriate words and applying correct headline structure.

Another common difficulty is maintaining brevity. Evaluators frequently described headlines as too long, and the campus journalists shared that balancing clarity and conciseness is challenging. Many attempt to include too much information, resulting in wordy headlines. This reflects limited skill in condensing ideas, consistent with Patrimonio & Machutes (2023), who found that summarizing content within format constraints is a major difficulty for student writers.

The campus journalists also experience structural and formatting problems, such as confusing word placement and misleading phrasing. While some attempt to experiment with headline construction, these efforts often lead to unclear or distorted meaning. This aligns with findings by Flores and Uy (2020) and Maxilom-Mangompit (2022), who emphasized the need for stronger training in headline structure, editing, and proofreading.

In addition, mechanical and stylistic errors, including incorrect capitalization, spacing, and limited vocabulary, were frequently observed. The campus journalists acknowledged these weaknesses, noting that limited language proficiency and incomplete mastery of news writing conventions affect their ability to produce effective headlines. Similar issues were reported by Damit and Dano-Hinosolango (2022), as well as in professional style guides, which highlight common errors in grammar and headline formatting.

Finally, there is a significant issue of inconsistency between the headline, lead, and body. Evaluators and campus journalists both noted that headlines sometimes fail to match the article's main focus, especially as writers lose direction in later paragraphs. This indicates that headline errors are often linked to a broader difficulty in maintaining a consistent angle throughout the article. As noted by Flores and Uy (2020) and Albino (2021), aligning the headline with the lead and body is a skill that requires practice and development.

Table 1. Themes of Issues in Headline Writing of Campus Journalists based on Evaluator's Remarks and Student Interviews

Recurring Issues in Headline Writing	
1.	Lack of clarity or weak focus
2.	Overlong headline requiring conciseness
3.	Ineffective headline structure or formatting
4.	Mechanical or stylistic inconsistencies
5.	Misalignment with story content

Lead Writing Issues

As shown in Table 2, based on both evaluator feedback and student reflections, consistent difficulties affect the clarity, structure, and effectiveness of their leads.

One major issue is the lack of clarity and completeness. Evaluators described many leads as vague, incomplete, or confusing, often lacking key factual details. The campus journalists admitted difficulty fitting all essential information, particularly the 5Ws and 1H, into a single sentence without making it too long or crowded. This suggests that the problem lies in organizing and condensing information while maintaining clarity. Fang (2024) noted that clarity is often one of the lowest self-assessed skills for journalism students.

Related to this is the issue of missing context and insufficient details. Some leads failed to provide enough background or specific information, limiting readers' understanding of the story. The campus journalists expressed hesitation in summarizing details for fear of omitting important information or making errors. According to Graham et al. (2018), students often struggle with selecting essential information and organizing it concisely, especially when multiple important details are involved. This can lead to either overly simplified writing that lacks depth or overly detailed writing that lacks focus.

Another challenge is conciseness. Evaluators frequently recommended shortening and tightening leads, while the campus journalists struggled to identify the most important details and arrange them effectively. This often resulted in lengthy or unfocused sentences. Fang (2024) further suggests that although students value brevity, they tend to produce longer, cluttered leads due to limited practice in prioritizing information.

The campus journalists also showed difficulty with awkward and wordy sentence construction. Evaluators noted unclear phrasing and overly long sentences, which the campus journalists attributed to feeling overwhelmed by too much information and uncertainty about what to include. These issues are linked to weak organization and difficulty in structuring ideas clearly (Deiparine et al., 2024; Donasco, 2025).

In addition, grammar, syntax, and punctuation errors were common. These mechanical issues reduced clarity and professionalism, even when the content was relevant. The campus journalists acknowledged struggles with sentence construction and sequencing, confirming that such errors are connected to broader writing challenges rather than isolated mistakes. Instructional guide by Fiveable Content Team (2025) defines that news leads are brief, fact-based openings but note that students frequently fall into feature-style writing or bury key details.

Another concern is the use of inappropriate or non-news lead structures. Some campus journalists wrote leads resembling feature or narrative styles instead of straightforward news leads. This

reflects confusion about journalistic conventions, particularly in prioritizing information and choosing the correct lead type. Research shows that many students struggle with structuring information logically and selecting the most relevant details, which affects coherence and clarity in their writing (Patty, 2024).

In the interview and FGDs, many campus journalists expressed low confidence in their writing and depended heavily on teacher feedback to improve. Uncertainty increased when feedback was lacking, while constructive comments helped build confidence and guide revision. Research supports this, showing that writing confidence and performance improve with consistent feedback and practice (Fang, 2024; Lawson et al., 2021).

Table 2. Themes of Issues in Lead Writing of Campus Journalists

Recurring Issues in Lead Structure
1. Lack of clarity or completeness
2. Awkward or wordy sentence construction
3. Grammar, syntax, or punctuation errors
4. Need for conciseness and tighter focus
5. Insufficient context or missing factual details
6. Inappropriate or non-news lead structure

Overall Body Structure and Organization Errors

Table 3 shows the recurring overall body organization issues of the campus journalists in writing news. Both evaluators and campus journalists highlight that these problems stem from deeper difficulties in managing information and maintaining a consistent story angle.

One key issue is the lack of clarity and development of ideas. Evaluators noted that some body paragraphs were underdeveloped or insufficiently explained. The campus journalists admitted difficulty prioritizing information, often viewing all details as equally important. This leads to weak elaboration and unclear presentation of key points. As corroborated by Wismanto et al. (2022), lack of clarity and underdeveloped ideas persist as a key issue in student journalism, with evaluators often noting body paragraphs that remain superficial or poorly explained.

Another major concern is disorganized sequencing and inconsistent flow. While the campus journalists often gather relevant information, they struggle to arrange it logically, resulting in uneven paragraphing, repetition, and awkward transitions. Interviews reveal that the campus journalists lose track of structure when handling large amounts of information. Such deficiencies not only dilute readability but also mirror broader training gaps in news architecture, as noted in analyses of unedited tertiary-level articles (Gamboa, 2019).

The campus journalists also face conciseness issues, including wordiness, redundancy, and overly long paragraphs. Evaluators observed repetitive and dense writing, while campus journalists admitted including unnecessary details due to difficulty filtering information. This shows that conciseness depends on the ability to identify essential points, not just shorten text (Deiparine et al., 2024).

Related to this is the problem of incomplete elaboration and missing context. Some body paragraphs lacked sufficient detail or

clear progression, making the story harder to understand. The campus journalists acknowledged uncertainty in developing ideas and organizing them properly, which often results in fragmented explanations. Previously explored researches confirmed this, as these issues pose significant hurdles in student journalism, where body paragraphs frequently lack depth, detail, or logical progression, rendering stories difficult to follow (Gamboa, 2019; Pacaldo, 2019).

There are also tone inconsistencies and deviations from journalistic style. Evaluators noted shifts in tone and language use, often influenced by students' difficulties with English grammar and vocabulary. These issues can make writing appear informal or inconsistent with standard news style. Teaching materials on the inverted pyramid model emphasize the need to focus on the most important information and remove unnecessary details (American English, n.d.).

In addition, technical and mechanical errors, such as problems with grammar, punctuation, quotation, and formatting, further reduce clarity. The campus journalists admitted confusion with basic writing conventions, and these errors often disrupt meaning and flow. Similar findings have been reported in studies on campus journalism and student writing (Deiparine et al., 2024; Canisi & Lambenicio, 2023).

Finally, campus journalists struggle with maintaining a consistent angle throughout the article. Many include irrelevant details or shift focus as the story progresses, leading to longer but less coherent articles. While campus journalists recognize the importance of staying on topic, they find it difficult to apply this consistently in their writing. According to the campus journalists in the interview, organizational control weakens as the article progresses. While campus journalists can align the headline, lead, and initial paragraphs, many struggle to maintain structure in later sections. The campus journalists admitted difficulty organizing the body and keeping the correct sequence, often resulting in longer and disordered articles. This reflects challenges in sustaining the chosen news angle, which is essential for deciding what information to include and maintaining focus throughout the story (TIME for Kids, 2023). Furthermore, the campus journalists, said in the interview that they experienced difficulty in filtering, eliminating, and organizing information. The campus journalists often feel overwhelmed by too much information and struggle to decide what to include, emphasize, or remove. As a result, they lose structure and fail to follow models like the inverted pyramid, which require prioritizing key details (American English, n.d.).

Table 3. Themes of Issues in Overall Body Organization Structure of Campus Journalists based on Evaluator's Remarks and Student Interviews

Recurring Issues in Overall Body Organization Structure
1. Lack of clarity or weak development in body paragraphs
2. Disorganized sequencing or inconsistent flow
3. Conciseness issues (wordy, redundant, overly long sections)
4. Incomplete or insufficient elaboration of key details
5. Inconsistent tone or deviation from journalistic style

Referential or Attribution Writing Errors

As shown in Table 4, a key problem is weak or inconsistent attribution, where statements are not clearly linked to a source. The campus journalists reported difficulty selecting which parts of interviews to quote, often leading to unclear or incomplete attribution. This weakens credibility, as clear sourcing is essential for transparency (Penenberg, 2020; Rogers, 2025).

Another issue is missing or incomplete source identification. Some statements lacked proper attribution due to practical challenges during interviews, such as failing to record names or unclear responses. This results in gaps that reduce reader trust. Research emphasizes that proper attribution must include both the identity and role of sources to ensure clarity and reliability (Burnham, n.d.; Hertzum et al., 2022).

The campus journalists also struggle with the placement and formatting of attribution. Evaluators noted awkward positioning, inconsistent formatting, and limited adherence to AP style. The campus journalists admitted uncertainty in organizing statements, which often leads to confusing or misplaced attribution. Journalism guidelines (e.g., Lead–Quote–Transition–Quote) highlight the importance of proper placement for clarity and flow (Zamith, n.d.).

In addition, technical and mechanical errors, such as incorrect punctuation, vague pronouns, and inconsistent formatting, affect attribution. While these may seem minor, they can reduce readability and even alter meaning. The campus journalists acknowledged these issues, including mistakes in quoting and paraphrasing that sometimes change the intended message. Instructional guides stress that even small errors in quotation mechanics can distort meaning (Bostwick, 2023).

As revealed in their interviews and FGDs, campus journalists face difficulty in selecting, filtering, and organizing quotations. Many struggle to identify the most relevant statements from lengthy or unclear interviews, sometimes due to environmental or recording challenges. As a result, they may overuse quotes or arrange them poorly. Teaching resources highlight that reporters should focus on the most meaningful parts of interviews and know when to quote, paraphrase, or summarize (UBC Science Writing Resources, n.d.; Jerz’s Literacy Weblog, 2023).

Table 4. Themes of Issues in Attribution and Referential Writing of Campus Journalists based on Evaluator’s Remarks and Student Interviews

Recurring Issues in Referential/Attribution Structure
1. Weak or inconsistent attribution
2. Missing or incomplete source identification
3. Incorrect or unclear placement of attribution
4. Minor mechanical or technical errors in attribution
5. Attribution does not fully align with speaker intent

News Writing Practices of Campus Journalists

As revealed in the themes and subthemes derived from the interviews and FGDs, the campus journalists employ various strategies to overcome difficulties in news writing, mainly through feedback, modeling, social support, digital resources, and consistent practice. Many rely on feedback to guide revisions and improve future outputs, while others develop their skills by reading and modeling effective journalistic writing. Support from peers,

advisers, and experienced writers also helps them address challenges. In addition, campus journalists use digital platforms such as social media, YouTube, and online resources for guidance. Persistence through continuous writing practice is also emphasized as a key factor in improvement. These strategies reflect active, self-directed learning supported by available resources (Berberović, 2022; Wen & Walters, 2022; Iowa Reading Research Center, 2024).

Feedback mechanisms, particularly peer editing, adviser input, and press conferences, play a crucial role in enhancing both skills and confidence. The campus journalists value feedback for enabling reflection, revision, and improvement. Adviser guidance and workshops are especially effective in strengthening understanding of structure, angling, and writing conventions (Bae & Jung, 2024; Sarango, 2023). While peer feedback promotes collaboration, campus journalists tend to rely more on advisers for accuracy and expert direction, consistent with findings on the importance of teacher feedback (Almutairi, 2023). Continuous revision based on feedback leads to improved writing quality, greater motivation, and increased confidence (Jansen et al., 2024; Qian & Li, 2025; Câmpean et al., 2024).

In terms of training priorities, campus journalists highlighted the importance of both foundational and relevant topics. Core skills such as news writing, angling, organization of facts, attribution, and interviewing remain essential areas for development. The campus journalists also emphasized covering real and underreported campus issues, which enhances engagement and purpose (Youth Journalism Development Program, 2023). Additionally, they identified the need for training in ethical reporting, fact-checking, and specialized fields such as investigative journalism, data journalism, and development communication. These priorities align with established standards in journalism education and information literacy (ACEJMC, 2022; UNESCO, 2025; ACRL, 2021; SPJ, 2022; CUNY, 2022; UNESCO, 2023; King, 2025; Solutions Journalism Network, 2024).

Regarding preferred training formats, the campus journalists favor approaches that integrate theory with practice. Lecture-workshop models, mentorship, and hands-on activities with direct feedback are considered most effective. Time-pressured writing tasks and simulations, such as mock press conferences, help develop real-world skills. Smaller, focused workshops are also preferred, as they improve engagement, understanding, and quality of feedback. These preferences are supported by research on experiential learning and skill development (Maryna et al., 2024; Bae & Jung, 2024; Iowa Reading Research Center, 2025; Poynter, 2025; Qian & Li, 2025).

Finally, the campus journalists identified gaps in institutional support, emphasizing the need for continuous training rather than one-time programs. They also highlighted the importance of adequate funding, facilities, and access to updated tools and resources. Recognition of campus journalists’ work was seen as important for motivation, while stronger internal systems, such as regular feedback, editorial guidance, and fair workload distribution, were viewed as necessary for sustained productivity. Research supports these concerns, showing that consistent training, sufficient resources, and institutional support significantly influence campus journalists’ performance and publication quality (Docallas, 2025; Cubillas & Cubillas, 2021; Callo & Callobos, 2025).

Table 5. Themes and Subthemes of Practices in News Writing

Themes	Subthemes
Strategies for Overcoming Difficulties in News Writing	1. Feedback
	2. Reading and modeling
	3. Social support and practice
	4. Digital resources
Influence of Peer Editing, Adviser Feedback, and Press Conferences	1. Peer editing, adviser feedback, and press conferences
	2. Workshops and adviser input
	3. Positive recognition
Priority Training Topics	1. Foundational topics that reflect real campus issues
	2. Primordial journalistic skills (news writing, angling, fact organization, and attribution)
	3. Reporting and information-gathering skills, particularly during interviews
	4. Ethical reporting, fact-checking, and specialized fields like investigative journalism, data journalism, and development communication (DevCom)
Preferred Training Formats	1. Instruction with hands-on Practice
	2. Mentorship and feedback
	3. Practice-based and time-pressured tasks
	4. Simulations, like mock press conferences
	5. Smaller, focused workshops
Institutional Support for Campus Journalists	1. Continuous, not just one-time training
	2. Financial and material Resources
	3. Recognition
	4. Strengthened Internal Support

Conclusion

This study concludes that campus journalists at Cagayan State University Lal-lo Campus possess basic knowledge of news writing but struggle to consistently apply essential journalistic principles in practice. Recurring issues in headlines, leads, body organization, and attribution show that the campus journalists have difficulty identifying key information, organizing ideas logically, maintaining a clear news angle, and ensuring accuracy in sourcing. These weaknesses indicate that their challenges are interconnected and rooted in limited skills in processing and structuring information according to journalistic standards.

Recommendations

Although the campus journalists demonstrate initiative through feedback-seeking, practice, and use of available resources, these efforts alone are not enough to address their writing difficulties. Thus, the study strongly recommends the implementation of structured and continuous training programs led by campus journalism advisers, focusing on hands-on writing, guided practice, and regular feedback. Campus journalists must also engage in consistent writing and critical reading, while school administrators should provide sustained support through resources, training opportunities, and recognition. Strengthening editorial systems within the publication is also necessary to ensure quality outputs. Overall, improving the campus journalists' news writing competence requires a coordinated and sustained effort, emphasizing practical training, consistent guidance, and institutional support.

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The author declares no conflict of interest in the conduct and the preparation of this manuscript.

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