

Newswriting Exercise

You're on the graveyard shift at the Centerville Gazette. You phone the cops to see if anything's going on. Lt. Jane Ortlieb of the Centerville Police Department tells you the following:

There was a shooting tonight at the Fandango Bar & Grill on Wilson Street in the Grungeville section of the city. Two men in the bar got into an argument. When the two started shoving each other, the bartender threw them out. For several minutes, people in the bar said they could hear the men still arguing on the street outside. Then there was the sound of a shot being fired. A few patrons rushed outside to see what had happened, and one of the men who had been arguing lay on the ground in a pool of blood. He'd been shot in the forehead. The victim appeared to be in his mid 30s, and was dressed in an expensive-looking suit and tie. The shooter was nowhere to be seen. The shooting occurred around 10:45 p.m.

Ortlieb tells you the man was rushed to St. Mary's Hospital but was DOA. She says homicide detectives are on the scene interviewing bar patrons about what happened but so far, no one seems to know much. "That's not surprising," she adds. "The Fandango is a known hangout for drug dealers and users, and people aren't likely to talk." Ortlieb says detectives don't yet have a motive for the shooting, but she speculates that the two might have been arguing over a drug deal.

Just as you're about to hang up, Ortlieb tells you she just got the cause of death from the hospital - a .38-caliber bullet wound to the head. "And oh yeah," Ortlieb adds, "we got an ID on the victim. He's Peter Wickham, press secretary for the mayor. Age 35." Centerville's mayor is named Fred Wiley.

First of all, in one sentence, sum up this story. What's the most important piece of information you know so far—the who, the when, the where, the why, or the how?

Looking over the facts so far, what's the question you most need to answer?

After you hang up the phone, you can make your own phone calls. You might call the mayor's office. You can also go down to the Fandango Bar and ask your own questions. What are the first five questions—meaning the most important questions to the story—that you would ask?