

## Teaching Unit 21: News Language

### Background

*News* is the general term for information which is new to us, and is most often used to refer to institutionally produced reports of recent events. These reports traditionally appeared in the form of newspapers, magazines and other printed news sheets, as well as radio and television newscasts. Today we most often encounter news in electronic form. News organizations post individual stories on their websites and social media feeds and these are recirculated by readers to their own audiences. The present Teaching Unit covers: Types of news text (comparing hard news to features to opinion writing), features of news language as a register, and written and spoken news.

Sample data are available at: <http://www.teachrealenglish.org/TU21>

### Part I: Types of news text

#### A. Hard news and features

The most “newsy” type of news, informally called *hard news*, mostly concerns government and public order. Governments have power over us. Government elections, taxes, and spending decisions change the world we live in. So do relations between nations, especially wars and their consequences, as well as decisions like Brexit. Some businesses have as much power as governments - and all businesses have power over their employees - so what businesses do is also hard news. Crime and public order is another important type of news. Although individual crimes and enforcement issues mostly affect the individuals involved, everyone wants to be aware of the dangers that may happen to them as well, and thus crime and inequities of law enforcement are news. Traditional news media such as television and newspapers have staffs of journalists whose job is to report on developments in these areas, following strict guidelines. Because this kind of news has to do with direct exercise of power, it is the most professionally prestigious type of news and is at the core of most formal journalism training programs.

Hard news is presented in a way that assumes people are skimming, not reading for pleasure. The point is to make it easy to grasp the essentials quickly, and this is accomplished with a headline and *lead* (first) paragraph that summarize the story. Details that are most important are given first, with less important information pushed lower down. But what is most important? That is a complicated question. Typically “important information” means the basic *who-what-when-where* information necessary to conceive of an event, and the *why* and *how* are placed soon after if possible. Where an event has many dimensions, typically those that affect the largest number of people are considered most important. Death, injury, loss of property and danger usually lead the story if any of those are present. Complex stories often have a “nut graph” (nut paragraph) that explains the significance and background of the story. This typically comes after the summary lead, but before quotes and details.

This format is called the *inverted pyramid*. Many images have been devised to explain it. Figure 1 shows two of the simpler ones. The term “newsworthy” is often used for “important” in these descriptions,

emphasizing the professional determination of importance according to rules and needs that are recognized by reporters and editors.

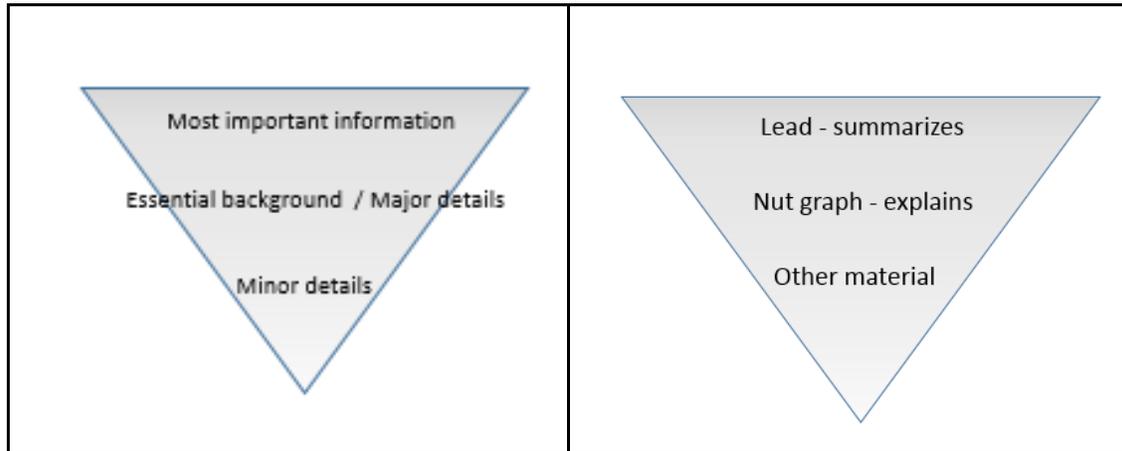


Figure 1. The inverted pyramid model of hard news

The way the details are sorted in the news story means that it is not told as a chronology, with a timeline running from top to bottom. Individual events are discussed out of sequence, although there will usually be time adverbials (*today, at 3 pm, on January 28*) that permit the timeline to be reconstructed. Because the hard news story is most often a report of past events, it is typically written in past tense with summaries of action. (There are exceptions, however. Can you think of any, or find some in today's news?) Quotations from participants in the story and from documents may be used to give different accounts and add human voices to the story. Paragraphs are short, usually one or two sentences, encouraging the eye to skip and skim through the story. The story as a whole is rarely longer than 800-1000 words, and usually shorter.

Other types of news include arts and entertainment news, technology news, fashion news, and sports news. These "soft" news subjects are often the ones we care most about, although they have little to no effect on our safety and standard of living. They may be event related (sports matches, film releases), and lead with a final outcome such as a score of some kind. Often, however, they are written as "features," a freer, magazine-style format that emphasizes reading pleasure over quick presentation of information. Feature stories are likely to include longer narrative sections or even be written in chronological order. They may focus on a personality or trend rather than an event that will be overshadowed the next day by a more recent event. For this reason they are less time dependent.

These stories still resemble hard news in their external layout, with headlines, images, and short paragraphs. However, features may be written in present tense with cinematic scene-setting descriptions and blow-by-blow narration. They may begin with a funny story or marginal aspect that leads into the nut graf, which here acts to summarize the main point (like the lead of a hard news story) as well as to position it in context. Features may include longer samples of naturalistic speech to illustrate character, or even dialogue. Feature news is written by professional journalists, and also by freelancers. Some of the features you read that appear to have no authors are in fact written by public relations specialists working for the companies or charities described in them.

Following are two stories about a type of short-term or gig work, food delivery by bicycle couriers, both from the *Guardian*. One is hard news and one is a feature.

## How Deliveroo's 'dark kitchens' are catering from car parks

As appetite grows for upmarket takeaways, delivery service is setting restaurants up with satellite kitchens inside metal boxes



▲ Deliveroo's dark kitchens under a railway line in Blackwall, east London, in the shadow of Canary Wharf's office towers. Photograph: Martin Godwin for the Guardian

**A**tatty car park under a railway line is squeezed between a busy road, an industrial site and a semi-derelict pub covered in graffiti. It's one of the grittiest parts of east London and probably the last place you would imagine some of the trendiest eateries in the country to be preparing meals.

But the grimy spot is just a short moped ride from the gleaming office towers of Canary Wharf and upmarket docklands apartments, and is therefore the perfect location for the latest idea from [Deliveroo](#), the food courier service. It is setting up dozens of "dark kitchens" in prefabricated structures for restaurants that want to expand their businesses without opening expensive high street premises.

Ten metal boxes of a similar size to a shipping container are on this site in Blackwall. They are fitted with industrial kitchen equipment, and two or three

# Deliveroo wins right not to give riders minimum wage or holiday pay

**Union accuses food delivery firm of 'gaming the system' as couriers are ruled to be self-employed rather than workers**



▲ Deliveroo has won a legal battle over its drivers' employment status. Photograph: Jill Mead for the Guardian

Deliveroo won the right not to give its couriers the minimum wage or holiday pay on Tuesday, dealing a blow to campaigners for workers' rights in the gig economy.

In a key legal ruling the Central Arbitration Committee, a body that resolves worker disputes, said the food delivery firm's riders were self-employed contractors as they had the right to allocate a substitute to do the work for them.

The case, brought by the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB) as part of an attempt to gain recognition by the company, relates to couriers in the

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/oct/28/deliveroo-dark-kitchens-pop-up-feeding-the-city-london>

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/nov/14/deliveroo-couriers-minimum-wage-holiday-pay>

- Which story do you think is the hard news and which story is the feature? What features do you base your decision on?
- How are time expressions and verb tenses used in each story? Can you reconstruct the timeline in each story?

- How are quotes used in each story?
- What seems to be more important (higher up) and less important (lower down) in the hard news story?
- How is the feature story organized? Is there a pattern here that you could use to write a similar story?
- Look at the number of shares and the number of comments. What aspects do people seem to be most interested in on each story? What might motivate them to share it? Search on Twitter and see if you can find how people presented and commented on each story in sharing it.

## B. Opinion columns

A third kind of media text that is often confused with hard news and features is the *opinion column*, *opinion piece*, *commentary* or *personal column*. Similar to a personal blog post, this is one person's account of their reflections on something - often a topic in the news. It is written in the first person, whereas hard news and features are written in the third person. It may include quotes or eyewitness accounts, but most often it has no firsthand reporting at all. Facts may be correct, but are less likely to have been through a verification process during editing. Opinions are given freely, in contrast to hard news where evaluations are only given through quotations from other people, and features where impressions still must be supported by eyewitnessing, interviewing or other reporting. The writing in an opinion piece is often vivid and personal and these texts are widely shared on social media by people who share the writer's point of view or find their experience worth reading.

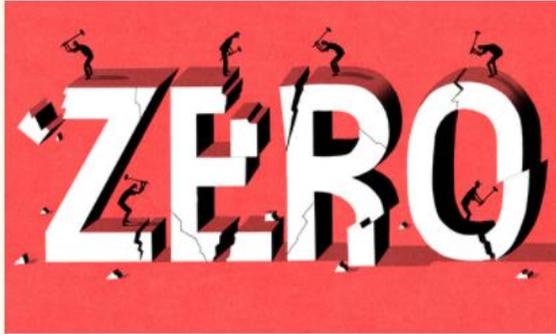
Here are two columns about gig work from the Guardian. One is a staff column by *Guardian* journalist Aditya Chakraborty. (He has since moved to writing *leaders* or *editorials*, the unsigned columns which express the newspaper management's position on issues.) The other is a guest column by the general secretary of a union for short-term or gig workers like those who work for Deliveroo. Opinion sections of news sites are usually a mixture of staff and guest-written columns.

## Yes, zero hours work can be banned: New Zealand has just done it

*Aditya Chakraborty*



Want to end the practices of Sports Direct, Hermes, Deliveroo and others? In New Zealand, workers took on big business and won



▲ Illustration by Bill Bragg.

One day in March an entire country decided to outlaw all zero-hours contracts. No ifs, no buts, no opt-outs. Yes, I'm talking about the same kind of zero-hours contracts that Sports Direct - which today agreed to pay more than 1,000 illegally underpaid workers around £1m in backpay - inflicts on about 90% of its staff. The deal that means your boss or agency can offer you however many hours whenever they like. The same arrangement on which a million Britons have to manage a weekly shop, the rent and a family.

And no, the zero-hours ban wasn't brought in by a nation that was famed for its progressive liberalism. The ban happened in New Zealand, which politically and economically is a kind of mini-Britain. We had Thatcherism; they had

## What everyone assumes about rights in the gig economy is wrong

*Jason Moyer-Lee*

The category of self-employed person who carries out their work as part of someone else's business exists. It's called a worker. And they have rights



▲ 'The media reporting presents flexibility and employment rights as a trade-off. This is a false dichotomy.' Photograph: Alamy

So Matthew Taylor, Theresa May's appointee to lead an inquiry into the so-called "gig economy", has called for employment rights for the self-employed. You might expect that we at Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB), many of whose members work in the so-called gig economy to be delighted. And yes, employment rights should certainly be improved, but a category of self-employed person who carries their work out as part of someone else's business and as such has employment rights already exists. It's called a worker (or limb (b) worker, to use the legal term).

Ever since couriers joined the union we have been raising the issue of the complete lack of workers' rights in the "gig economy". The lack of employment rights, and the total impunity with which companies have been allowed to act, is nothing short of astounding. A prime example is the case of the courier firm

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/16/zero-hours-banned-new-zealand-unite-union-mcdonalds-sports-direct-hermens-deliveroo>

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/mar/22/rights-gig-economy-self-employed-worker>

- Where can you find expressions of opinion in the columns? Where can you find facts?
- Compare these to the articles above. For each one, if it appeared on your news feed, how critical do you think you would be of it, and why?  
What points of view are represented in each article and column? What positions or points of view are not represented anywhere in the selection of news texts? How important do you think is it to consider them? Where would you go to find them?
- Each of these different types of news text, whether broad like hard news or narrow like a movie review (a subtype of arts and entertainment news), is a *genre*. You may have encountered that term in your literature studies. In linguistics, the definitions of genre vary widely, but each genre is usually considered to have recognizable "external" or "shape" characteristics, such as a headline and paragraphs; recognizable internal organization, such as the inverted pyramid; recognizable linguistic characteristics, and recognizable uses for its

audience. We will now consider some linguistic characteristics of news.

## Part II: News language as a type of language

News language differs from everyday language such as you might use with friends. Varieties of language that are used for public and professional purposes are called *registers*, for example legal language, scientific language, news language. These can be isolated into even more specialized varieties, for example the registers of election night broadcasts (Lauerbach 2007), weather news (Kuiper 2009), sports live commentary (Crystal and Davy 1969), football match reports (Chovanec 2014), national holiday celebration stories (ben-Aaron 2005), and popular science writing (Myers 2003).

Like academic language, language used in news media is conservative. That means it uses the same vocabulary and grammatical structures over and over again, whereas in daily life we are constantly searching for fresh ways to express ourselves. One advantage of reusing old wordings is that experienced readers can understand them easily and, usually, agree on what they mean. Not having to search for new words also means that news writers can write their stories more quickly. Part of the job of editors is to ensure that variation in news texts, particularly hard news texts, is minimized through reference to stylebooks of tried and tested expressions. These wordings are treated as correct, while variation from them is treated as incorrect. You will recognize this as a prescriptive approach to language (Milroy & Milroy 2001; for more on language prescriptivism, see Teaching Unit 3). By presenting their chosen wordings as authoritative and neutral, news media hope to deflect controversy about their language choices, and indeed to consolidate their position as sources of high quality language (Cotter 2010). More variable language does sometimes appear in the news, but mostly in quotes as well as in humorous feature headlines.

### Word list

Corpus: Guardian one  
Total number of items: 19  
Total frequency: 224

word	frequency
the	39
to	30
a	22
and	14
that	14
of	12
Deliveroo	11
for	10
said	9
riders	9
in	8
its	7
have	6
is	6
The	6
right	6
by	5
as	5
pay	5

### Word list

Corpus: Guardian two feature  
Total number of items: 35  
Total frequency: 391

word	frequency
the	52
and	36
in	26
to	25
a	21
of	20
for	19
is	16
are	15
Deliveroo	10
more	9
says	7
The	7
by	7
chefs	7
with	7
up	7
kitchens	7
have	6
or	6
that	6
be	6
London	6
delivery	6
from	6
dark	6
company	5
than	5
there	5
kitchen	5
food	5
one	5
boxes	5
metal	5
restaurants	5

### Word list

Corpus: Guardian three chakr  
Total number of items: 40  
Total frequency: 434

word	frequency
the	51
a	29
and	29
of	28
to	28
in	19
was	17
they	11
that	11
for	10
it	10
as	9
union	9
I	9
workers	9
are	8
by	8
The	8
on	8
New	8
work	8
with	7
n't	7
no	7
Zealand	7
their	6
battle	6
had	6
can	6
from	5
most	5
who	5
this	5
were	5
ago	5
years	5
you	5
its	5
about	5
hours	5

### Word list

Corpus: Guardian four union column  
Total number of items: 31  
Total frequency: 354

word	frequency
the	49
of	31
and	23
to	22
that	18
is	15
a	14
as	14
for	13
rights	13
their	10
in	10
employment	9
workers	8
with	8
we	8
an	8
flexibility	8
The	8
it	6
courier	6
companies	6
they	6
work	6
our	5
were	5
This	5
have	5
worker	5
who	5
gig	5

- Above are lists of all the words that appear more than five times in the news texts above (compiled with [Sketch Engine](#)) for the hard news story, the feature story, the Chakraborty column and the union official column. Some words are very common, like *the* and *is*, but below that there are words that are characteristic of each text.
- How do the frequencies align with your general sense of the topic of each text?
- Notice in particular *chefs*, *kitchen/s*, *restaurant/s* in the feature text; *union*, *workers*, *battle* and *hours* in the Chakraborty text, and *rights*, *employment*, *flexibility*, *companies* and *gig* in the union official text.

- Are there any absences that are surprising to you, given the topics and viewpoints of the texts?
- What synonyms for the words can you think of that seem to be excluded from the texts? (Remember however that words appearing fewer than five times are not listed.)
- Do any of the words seem overtly evaluative? In which text(s)?
- Do any of the words seem bureaucratic or euphemistic to you? Can you work out why you might think that?
- Read the article below and decide whether or not you agree that working conditions can be affected by the words used to describe jobs and workers. You can use examples from your own experience as well.

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/apr/05/deliveroo-couriers-employees-managers>

## Deliveroo accused of 'creating vocabulary' to avoid calling couriers employees

**Checklist for managers includes saying 'independent suppliers' instead of 'staff' and 'onboarding' instead of 'hiring'**



▲ The company document states that Deliveroo couriers' outfits must be described as 'kit', not 'uniform'.  
 Photograph: Daniel Leal-Olivas/AFP/Getty Images

Managers at Deliveroo have been given a list of dos and don'ts setting out how to talk to the firm's food delivery riders, using terms that appear designed to fend off claims that they are employees.

In a six-page document seen by the Guardian, Deliveroo says its couriers, who deliver takeaways, should always be referred to as "independent suppliers" - self-employed workers with few employment rights - rather than as employees, workers, staff or team members.

The business models of gig-economy companies such as Deliveroo and taxi app Uber are based on using thousands of self-employed contractors rather than

For one analysis of language and employment by a linguist, see Fairclough (1999).

### **The *Guardian* and British newspapers**

The *Guardian* is of course only one of the British national newspapers. It has the largest total reading audience (combining print, online and mobile readership) of the *broadsheet* newspapers, so called because of the large paper size that they used in the twentieth century. Other broadsheets include the *Times*, and the *Telegraph*. Past broadsheets include the *Independent*, which survives as the *i*, and the *Observer*, which is now the weekend edition of the *Guardian*. Broadsheets generally share elite and middle class values, espouse a rigorous approach to journalistic professionalism and ethics, invest money in public affairs reporting including investigations, and are especially conservative in their use of language. The *Guardian*, which began as the *Manchester Guardian* and changed its name in 1959 before moving to London, is the most left wing and Labourite of the broadsheets. The *Times* and especially the *Telegraph* are more aligned with Tory politics in their editorial views.

Tabloid newspapers, so called because they are associated with smaller paper size, include the *Sun*, the *Daily Mirror*, the *Daily Express*, and the *Daily Star*. Tabloids take a more theatrical approach to news, involving less attention to the mechanics of government, more attention to celebrities and pop culture, and frequent use of outrage and humor, especially in headlines (see Fowler 1994 on the “hysterical style” of tabloids). Their traditional readership is the old working classes, who recognize them as an entertainment business. *The Sun* is the largest traditional tabloid in combined readership and also the best selling print paper in the UK as of November 2016.

Other newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* and free city papers such as the *Metro* and the *Evening Standard* are considered intermediate between tabloids and broadsheets because of their appeal to a broad spectrum of readers. They use celebrity news, outrage and humor to attract audiences, but also do more public affairs coverage than the true tabloid papers do. The *Daily Mail* in particular is hard to classify. It shows concern for the public good, undertaking campaigns to right injustices, but also is known for its aggressive interest in private lives, both those of the rich and famous and those of ordinary people who sell their stories. The *Daily Mail* has the largest combined print and electronic readership of all newspapers in the UK in all categories. Both the *Daily Mail* and *Metro* have almost as many print readers as the *Sun*.

(Readership information is based on National Readership Survey figures reported in Ponsford 2017.)

### **Part III: Written and spoken news**

News and other media enter our minds through the medium of print or through the medium of audio (with or without accompanying video). There are systematic differences in the organization of language for audiences in print and in audio, paralleling differences in the organization of written and spoken language generally. Spoken language is generally considered by linguists to be the original form of language, and written language is derivative of it - although you might not think it from the way we are taught in school. News media evolved to communicate over news over long distances, which before the twentieth century could only be done through writing. The dominant style of news writing today evolved from nineteenth and twentieth century wire services, which originally used telegraphs to communicate and therefore wrote in a highly compressed style. The inverted pyramid style, with its

headlines, summary leads, and ranking of details from most to least important also helped ensure that the top news would get through even if the connection failed midway, and would be seen by readers even if they were skimming. This compressed style still helps news media to present information efficiently through the small screens of phones and other electronic devices.

Below are some of the typical differences between spoken and written style. For systematic presentations of the differences, see for example Milroy & Milroy (2012), Biber et al. (2002), and Chafe (1982).

**Pronouns:** Speech makes more use of first-person pronouns (*I, we*) and second-person pronouns (*you*). These are avoided in hard news (and often in feature writing) as they would signal personal involvement that is felt to be inappropriate in a fair presentation of news. In writing, names and other labels are spelled out completely and defined on first or second use (“King Richard III ... Richard III, the last Plantagenet, ruled England from 1483 until he was defeated in the Battle of Bosworth in 1485”), and then shorter forms (“Richard III”) and third person pronouns (*he, she, it, they*) can be used. In speech we are more likely to tease with a reference to a person or other entity that is only clarified later.

**Nominalization vs. predication:** Writing makes greater use of *nominalizations* (noun phrases) to encode actions that would otherwise take up whole clauses and slow down the reader. Encoding actions in clauses with finite verbs (verbs that agree with their subjects) is called *predication*. For example, “The government decided in the 1990s to privatize rail travel” (predication) in speech might be rendered as “the government’s rail privatization decision” (nominalization) when embedded in a tightly written news story.

**Subordination instead of coordination:** In talk we often chain clauses together with *and, or, but* and *so*. In writing, more precise connectors are used, called in many grammar books *subordinating conjunctions*. For example, “John Major’s government decided to privatize rail travel, and so British trains are run by a patchwork of companies” in speech could be rendered in a news story as “Because of the decision by John Major’s government to privatize rail travel, British trains are run by a patchwork of companies” or “British trains are run by a patchwork of companies because of the decision by John Major’s government to privatize rail travel.”

**Loose syntax and telegraphic thoughts:** Spontaneous speech usually contains fragments that are not regular full length predicated sentences, such as we expect of formal writing. Consider: “yeah,” “damn,” “um,” “that’s one ... two ... three ... done.” Newsreaders introducing a story or doing chitchat with each other may speak in this telegraphic way. In speech, especially if we can see the speakers, we have enough context for this kind of talk to mostly make sense. As listeners, we are used to getting partial understanding and building toward fuller understanding through the interaction, for example by asking questions. When we read, however, we are more demanding and want each unit to be clear right away.

**Emotion and evaluation:** Because it is chattier, spoken news is more likely to include evaluative judgments by people being interviewed. The newsreaders and reporter may try to avoid clear judgments themselves, but they may not be able to avoid giving off subtle clues to the attitude they wish the audience to have to the story through their facial expressions and tone of voice.

**Discourse markers:** Expressions like *well, so, and you know* are common in speech but infrequent in writing. These words and phrases often occur at the beginning of an utterance and help orient the hearer to the position the speaker is taking, while letting the speaker take a bit more time to get to the

point. Along with intonation, they help signal the speaker's attitude to what is being said and to the interaction as a whole.

**Hesitation and false starts:** We frequently stumble and misspeak in our talk. We also make false starts in writing, but because there is time for revision, these traces of just-in-time production can be removed.

These differences do not apply equally to all genres, all texts or all writers. In news media, quotes are likely to resemble speech more than the rest of the story does, as they are meant to be the speaker's precise words; however they may be cut and condensed, or may have been read from written documents in the first place.

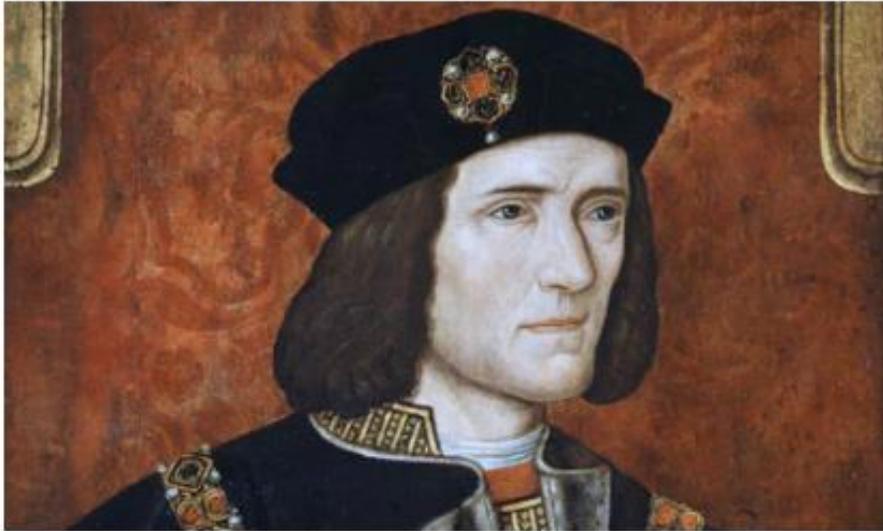
Here are two print and one television treatments of the discovery of Richard III's body.

<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2012/aug/24/richard-3-remains-leicester-dig>

<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2013/feb/04/richard-iii-dna-bones-king>

# Richard III could be buried under Leicester car park, archaeologists say

Experts from University of Leicester believe ground was once site of medieval church, but that discovery is still a 'long shot'



▲ Over the centuries many fables have arisen about the final resting place of Richard III. Photograph: Getty

Archaeologists are hoping to find the lost grave of King Richard III under a Leicester car park, which they believe was once the site of a church where the medieval monarch was buried more than 500 years ago.

Richard III, the last Plantagenet, ruled England from 1483 until he was defeated at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485. It is believed his body was stripped and despoiled and brought to Leicester, where he was buried in the church of the Franciscan Friary, known as Greyfriars.

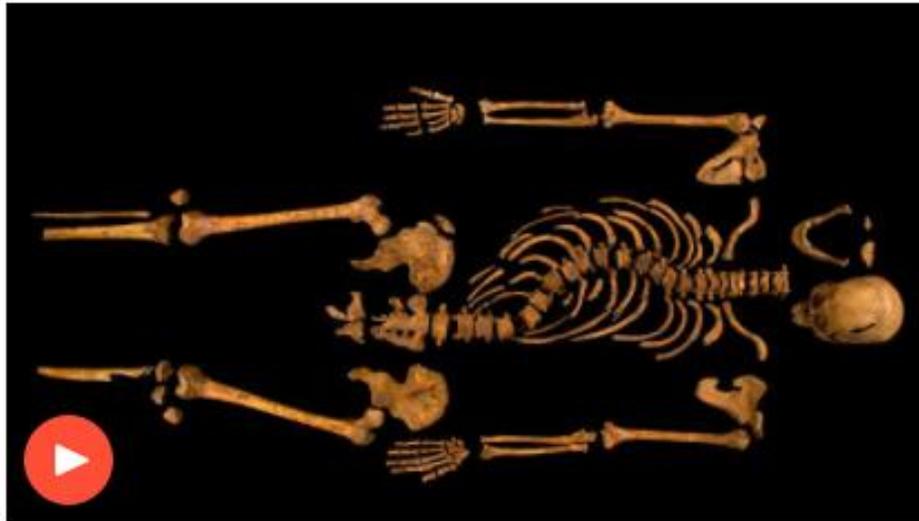
But the exact whereabouts of the church have become lost over time and it is rumoured the monarch's bones could have been thrown in to the River Soar after

## Richard III: DNA confirms twisted bones belong to king

Skeleton found beneath Leicester car park confirmed as that of Richard III, as work begins on new tomb near excavation site

- [Read the latest on the discovery here](#)

100



Not just the identity of the man in the car park with the twisted spine, but the appalling last moments and humiliating treatment of the naked body of Richard III in the hours after his death have been revealed at an [extraordinary press conference](#) at Leicester University.

There were cheers when Richard Buckley, lead archaeologist on the hunt for the king's body, finally announced that the university team was convinced "beyond reasonable doubt" that it had found the last Plantagenet king, bent by scoliosis of the spine, and twisted further to fit into a hastily dug hole in Grey Friars church, which was slightly too small to hold his body.



King in the Car Park: Richard III skeleton authentic

- What differences in structure do you see between the introductions to the Channel 4 story by Cathy Newman and the headlines/leads of the February 4 *Guardian* story? Both are designed to give the essence of the story and get the attention of the audience.
- Take a stretch of the TV story and try to figure out where the sentences begin and end. Are there parts of the utterance that fall outside “normal” sentence structure?
- Look at the speakers in the TV story. How do they supplement their speech with intonation, facial expression and gesture? Give examples. How could the same meaning be transmitted in a written news story? Could it be transmitted at all in the same way?
- The August 24 *Guardian* story is hard news because it reveals new information (at the time) which the newspaper cannot wait to public. However, it is different from typical hard news stories. How? (Hint: compare the verbs with those in the February 4 story.)

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