

# PRESS ARTICLE: REPORTING THE DEATH PENALTY

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**Definition:** written by journalists, the press article is a text relating an event, presenting facts or exposing a point of view. It is based upon oral, written or visual sources of information.

## SPECIFICITIES OF THE PRESS ARTICLE

- The press article must fit a **particular structure**.  
Every article is topped by the **headline**, which must attract the readers' interest and give important information.  
Then comes the **opening paragraph** or lead, consisting in one or two lines, which provides the most important and interesting news. It answers the questions *what? who? when? where?*  
Further, some **short paragraphs** including quotes from people involved or experts, express the main ideas and diverse facts. It answers the questions *why? and how?*
- Details are usually given in **order of importance**, with the least important details at the end of the article to give the readers the essential facts before deciding to read on. The opinion of the writer must be accurate and balanced, provide facts supporting both sides of the issue. The expression must be clear and concise.
- Usually, press articles are illustrated with **photographs**. The pictures may serve different objectives. First it can give a **visual presentation** of complex facts, help delivering information more easily than a written description would. The press article can also **add information, and guide the understanding** of the reader by showing a particular aspect of the facts or by provoking an emotional reaction. The illustration can also be symbolic, to make the reader think.



## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To be able to analyse a press article and identify its particularities
- To be able to point out the journalist point of view and his/her expression of subjectivity
- To be able to write a press article

*Ensemble  
contre  
la peine  
de mort*

ECPM  
69, rue Michelet  
93 100 Montreuil • France  
Tél. : +33 1 57 63 03 57  
Fax : +33 1 57 63 89 25  
Email : [ecpm@abolition.fr](mailto:ecpm@abolition.fr)  
[www.abolition.fr](http://www.abolition.fr)

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# INTRODUCTION TO THE PRESS ARTICLE...



**Troy Davis was an African-American man accused of murdering a police officer in 1989 in the state of Georgia. Troy Davis always claimed his innocence, and because of many doubts on his guilt, human rights associations worldwide got involved in defending his case. Troy Davis spent 22 years on the death row and was executed on September 2011.**

## Watching an execution: AJC reporter was inside the death chamber

### TEXT 1:

From an article written by Rhonda Cook, reporter for *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (AJC), the major daily newspaper in the district of Atlanta, Georgia, United States.

*Just after 10:30 Wednesday night three words stopped the conversation among reporters instantly.*

*“Are you ready?” a correctional officer asked. Media are as much a part of the execution process as the officers who escort the inmate to the death chamber or the officers who strap the condemned to a gurney.*

***Wednesday, we were there as unbiased witnesses, sitting behind the condemned family and those who arrested Troy Davis for the 1989 murder of police officer Mark Allen MacPhail.***

*Carl Humphrey, the warden, began the process by reading the execution order «The court having sentenced defendant Troy Anthony Davis on the third day of September, 1991, to be executed...» Then he asked Davis if he has any final words. Yes, the condemned man said and he raised his head so he could look at Mark MacPhail Jr., who was an infant when his father was murdered, and William MacPhail, the dead officer’s brother.*

*“I’m sorry for your loss,” Davis said. Mark MacPhail, who was leaning forward, and his uncle did not move. They stared at the man who killed their loved one.*

*“I did not personally kill your son, father and brother,” Davis said. “I am innocent. “ He asked his family and friends to continue to search for the truth. He then lowered his head. He turned down an offer for a prayer.*

*Within minutes, Troy Anthony Davis slipped out of consciousness and in 14 minutes he was dead. A three-drug cocktail ended his life. First pentobarbital put Davis in a drug-induced coma. The paralytic pancuronium bromide was second. Potassium chloride stopped Davis’ heart.*

*“The court ordered execution of Troy Anthony Davis was carried out in accordance with the laws of the state of Georgia,” the warden announced. There was a hoard of local, national and international reporters waiting for us to describe what happened. He went peacefully, one of the reporters said.*

## Associated Press Reporter Describes Witnessing Troy Davis Execution

### TEXT 2:

From an article written by Greg Bluestein, reporter for The Associated Press, a global news agency based in the United States.

*JACKSON, Ga. — It didn’t take long to notice Troy Davis’ execution was different from the others I’ve covered. As I drove up to the prison, I could see the crowds of protesters and a group of at least 50 reporters.*

*I’ve covered about 10 executions in Georgia. None of them are easy. This was by far the most unusual.*

*There were four reporters besides me there to witness the execution. We ended up waiting for more than four hours in a somber prison break room.*

*Around 10:30 p.m., a guard walked in and said: “Are you ready?”*

*By the time we were inside, officials had already strapped Davis to the gurney. **There was a glass window with a curtain separating Davis from the witnesses, who sat in three rows of seats.***

*Davis searched for Jason Ewart, his attorney, who nodded slightly when they locked eyes. MacPhail Jr., sitting in the front row, focused on Davis.*

*When it was time to deliver his last words, Davis’ seized the moment, speaking quickly and confidently.*



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He told the MacPhail family he was not responsible for the death. "I am innocent. The incident that happened that night is not my fault," he said. Davis urged his supporters to "continue to fight the fight." And just before the lethal drugs

coursed through his veins, he offered a message to his executioners: "God have mercy on your souls."

Davis blinked his eyes rapidly. He closed them tight. The curtain closed.

## Exercises: Getting the meaning

# ABCD

### TEXT 1

#### 1) Vocabulary

a - Find the synonyms of these words in the text:

- A prisoner **inmate** • To attach to **strap** • Objective **unbiased** • Awareness **consciousness** • Condemned **sentenced**

b - Find the words corresponding to these definitions in the text:

- A metal bed with wheeled legs used for transporting people who can't walk **gurney**
- Someone who sees, hears or knows what happened **witness**
- Chief administrative of a prison **warden**
- To look directly and fixedly to someone or something **stare**
- Provoked by the ingestion of a toxic substance **drug-induced**

#### 2) Translate the sentence in bold letters into French

**Mercredi, nous étions là comme des témoins impartiaux, assis derrière la famille du condamné et ceux qui ont arrêté Troy Davis pour le meurtre de l'officier de police Mark Allen MacPhail, en 1989.**

#### 3) Grammar : among

What does the preposition among refer to? Does it have any equivalent in English?

**Among refers to a relationship involving different persons or things to describe the centrality. The preposition between can be used as an equivalent.**

Create a sentence using this preposition and at least two words you learned from your study of the text.

### TEXT 2

#### 1) Vocabulary

a - Make these words match with their meaning in French:

curtain	•	•	cligner
confidently	•	•	remarquer
attorney	•	•	avec assurance
to blink	•	•	inciter (encourager)
to urge	•	•	avocat
row	•	•	rideau
to notice	•	•	rangée

b - Find the words corresponding to these definitions in the text:

- To be responsible for writing about an event, as a journalist **to cover**
- A large number of persons gathered together **crowd**
- To lower and raise the head quickly as an indication of agreement or acknowledgement **to nod**
- To concentrate one's attention on someone or something **to focus**
- To express a message **to deliver**

#### 2) Translate the sentence in bold letters into French

**Il y avait un carreau en verre avec des rideaux séparant Davis des témoins, assis sur les trois rangées de sièges.**

#### 3) Grammar : to say / to tell

If these two verbs express the same action (speaking) a major grammatical element makes a difference between them, which one? You can help yourself using the example given by the text.

**You say something "the guard walked and said: Are you ready"**

**You tell someone something "He told the MacPhail family he was not responsible for the death"**

Create a sentence (or two) with the verbs to say and to tell and at least two words you learned from your study of the text.

## Studying press articles

# ABCD

TEXT 1 and TEXT 2

After reading again the texts now that you have a better understanding of it, answer those questions.

1) Structure of a press article

a-What is the first thing you read in a press article? **The headline.**

What criteria must it comply with? **It should be brief, clear and to the point.**

b-The text in itself always begins with some objective elements, which ones?

**The date, the place.**

In your opinion, what is the function of the first sentences, also called the lead?

**Grab the reader, generate interest, and say concisely what is happening.**

**Usually, the lead answers to general questions. Is it exactly the case in these articles?**

**Can you guess why? Though the journalists give their readers some of this information, what? who? when? where? are not all developed here, for example in the first article the name Troy Davis appears only at the 4<sup>th</sup> sentence. It may be because this case was very famous in the US and worldwide as mentioned in both articles (“a hoard of journalists” - “the crowds of protesters and a group of at least 50 reporters”), making the article expected by most of the readers.**

c-Compared to other texts you have read, from English literature for example, what

particularities of the press article can you observe here? **The sentences, as well as paragraphs, are quite short; the language is neutral, neither fancy nor colloquial.**

2) Expression of the journalists' point of view

a-The two journalists witnessed Troy Davis' execution, they both have seen exactly the same facts and the first article insists on the fact journalists are “unbiased witnesses”. Yet, have you had the same feelings while reading the first and the second article? **No, the first article expresses calm and order whereas the other one rather expresses the brutality of Troy Davis' execution.**

b-According to you, what elements in the first article make Troy Davis' execution look like natural death? On the opposite, what elements in the second article show this execution was special?

**The journalist of AJC insists on the legal aspects of the execution, she quotes the execution order twice and writes the execution was done “in accordance with the laws of the state of Georgia”.**

**The AP journalist mentions the fact that many protesters were present in front of the prison and insists on the very “unusual” aspect of this execution.**

c-What is written or omitted by the two journalists respectively that could characterize their

opinion of what they have seen? **The journalist of AJC seems to side more with the MacPhail family as she never mentions Davis' relatives, she doesn't seem to question his guilt when she writes “the man who killed their loved one” she describes the death of Troy Davis as something quite gentle and quotes a counterpart who said “he went peacefully”. The AP journalist mentions the MacPhail family's reaction as well as Davis' attorney's behavior, he gives more details on the way Davis spent his last minutes, on the way he talked. In the end, the AP reporter uses 3 short sentences to illustrate the tragic aspect of the execution and its brutality, with the parallel image of eyes and curtain that are open, then definitely closed.**

d-Do you think it is possible for journalists to be fully objective and avoid expressing their own mind?

**No it must be very difficult not to express one's opinion while reporting some events, the choice of what fact to tell, what detail to disclose, even the choice of what word to use is a subjective process.**

- 3) Be a journalist yourself! Here are some factual elements of a case that happened in the United States in 2000 and for which one of the accused, George Rivas, was executed in February 2012. Report on the execution as if you were an American journalist covering the event. Your article must be of 10 to 15 lines.

George Rivas was born in 1970, he was married and had two children. He committed several robberies<sup>1</sup> but was said to always make sure his victims were not injured<sup>2</sup>. After spending several years in prison, Rivas organised an escape with six of his fellow prisoners, without making any victim. Rivas became the famous leader the “Texas 7” and the gang later committed various robberies until one finally ended up in the death of a police officer. Officer Aubrey Hawkins, 29 years old at the time, heard the call of an employee of the store being robbed while eating Christmas Eve dinner with his wife, his son, his mother and grandmother. He tried to arrest the gang but was shot several times and died a few hours later.

George Rivas was arrested again and sentenced to death; he was executed in Huntsville, Texas, in February 2012. Here are some dispatches<sup>3</sup> relating his execution:

11:45AM George Rivas spent this morning meeting with friends behind glass at Texas death row<sup>4</sup>

4:42PM The widow<sup>5</sup> of police Officer Aubrey Hawkins, will not attend the execution. She said she felt no closure<sup>6</sup> after being present at the last execution of a Texas 7 gang member in 2009

5:59PM George Rivas will be strapped to a gurney, arms extended, and an intra-venous for the lethal injection will be inserted in both arms. Once he’s strapped down, the warden will call for witnesses to enter the two observation rooms

6:07PM Prior to his execution George Rivas made a final statement:

“First of all, for the Aubrey Hawkins family, I do apologise for everything that happened. Not because I am here, but for closure in your hearts. I really believe you deserve that. To my wife, Cheri: I am so grateful you’re in my life. I love you so dearly. Thank you to my sister and dear friend, Katherine Cox, my son and my family. Friends and family, I love you so dearly. To my friends, all the guys on the row, you have my courtesy and respect. Thank you to the people involved and the courtesy of the officers. I am grateful for everything in my life. To my wife, take care of yourself, I will be waiting for you. I love you, God bless. I am ready to go.

6:10PM The lethal drugs took effect on George Rivas quickly. He was pronounced dead at 6:22PM 10 minutes after the injection began.

- 1 braquage
- 2 blessées
- 3 dépêches
- 4 Couloir de la mort, lieu particulier de la prison dans lequel les condamnés à mort attendent leur exécution, parfois plusieurs années
- 5 veuve
- 6 soulagement



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# GOING FURTHER TO THE PRESS ARTICLE...



## PRESS PHOTOGRAPHY

Here are some examples of press pictures illustrating Troy Davis' execution:

- a-Fragmented picture of Troy Davis
- b-The death chamber
- c-Demonstrations prior to Troy Davis' execution



### Exercises:

ABCD

- 1) React to the three pictures. What do they show? What message do they deliver according to you?  
 The first picture is very cold and stark. It can seem rather very neutral and render the execution a natural or mechanical proceeding as we can see no person, only machines. This can also enlighten the inhumane aspect of the execution and create disgust and repulsion.  
 The second picture is more biased as it sides with the death penalty abolition activists and Troy Davis' defenders. We can see people expressing that they don't want anyone to be killed in the name of justice, of the State and therefore in their name (from the placards and the bloody hands in the back). This picture puts the light on the fact Troy Davis was supported by a vast mobilisation.  
 The third picture is the most famous portrait of Troy Davis, but here, his face has been split by someone. This can symbolise the fact his physical integrity, his identity, has been destroyed by the action of some people allegedly representing the justice system.
- 2) Which picture would you chose to illustrate each article? Explain your choices.  
 The first picture would fit better to the first article, and the second to the second article, but of course the answer depends on the students' point of view and justifications.
- 3) You may have heard about Troy Davis' case in the media or have done research on it. In your opinion, what image illustrates his story better? Why?

### LET'S TALK ABOUT DEATH PENALTY!

While going out from the prison, the two journalists who witnessed Troy Davis' execution stop to have a coffee in Atlanta. They start exchanging their views on what they have seen. One used to be in favor of death penalty, the other one was against, they are above all willing to understand each other. Imagine their conversation.



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