EXPLAINING EXPLAINERS

Create evergreen content—and drive online traffic—by answering the questions behind the headlines

Hotsheets

BY KIM PITTAWAY, Writer, Editor, Consultant – kimpittaway.com

WHAT IS AN EXPLAINER?

An explainer is a journalistic story format that provides key background or context helpful in understanding an ongoing news story. While a news report provides the most current snapshot of a developing news story—"this is what happened today"—an explainer explores the roots, history or context of a story and answers the question "this is why what happened matters." As a result, explainers often have a longer shelf-life—while news reports are timely, explainers lean towards being timeless. For this reason, explainers are sometimes called "evergreen" or "stock" stories.

WHY IS AN EXPLAINER USEFUL?

Readers don't always know the context and background behind on-going stories. But the insertion of that background into every news report or update can result in repetitive, lengthy stories, and the repetition of that background can bore readers who are familiar with it. An explainer, linked to the news update, can provide a solution and is an easy way to add clear context to a story for those who want it.

HOW IS AN EXPLAINER STRUCTURED?

Start with the most compelling question. Begin with the question at the heart of why this matters—not with the most basic information. Think about it this way: in reading about the issue or topic, what might make a reader say "I don't understand why…" It might be "I don't understand why these two groups are fighting over this" or "I don't understand why people would be in favour of less freedom of expression" or "I don't understand how the government gets away with that." Explainers typically have at their core a "how" or "why" question—questions that go beyond basic facts such as who, what, where and when. These basic who, what, where and when facts can often be found with a simple Google search—but the "how" and "why" questions are tougher to find clear, simple answers to.

Frame the main question as directly as possible.

Break the answer up into logical bite-sized pieces or sub-questions. Take a look at what Vox.com does with their Card Stacks. For instance, they provide answers to over 20 questions under the heading "Everything you need to know about Israel-Palestine," from "Why are they fighting?" to "What is the West Bankare the 'two-state solution' and the 'one-state solution'?". The BBC takes a similar approach, but bundles all of the sub-questions onto a single web page. So a BBC explainer titled "The UK's EU referendum: All you need to know" provides short, direct answers to 42 questions. In this case, the BBC does cover some of the basic who, what, when, where questions that provide the information that readers will need to understand some of the more complex how and why questions.

Consider creating an explainer template. The Economist takes an even simpler approach: one key question answered in four paragraphs: set-up, background, explanation and implications. *The Economist* presents these both as straight text stories ("Why Nigeria has not yet defeated Boko Haram") and as short (two-minute or so) voice-over videos ("Why the conflict in Colombia endures"). Links to other stories on the topic are typically included at the end under the subheading "Dig Deeper."

Bloomberg QuickTake stories are structured similarly to *The Economist*'s, but more highly packaged with subheds, such as this one on Syria's Civil War. Their stories open with a short news-hook introduction, followed by sections subheaded "The Situation" (often accompanied by a chart or other infographic), "The Background" (again often with a chart or infographic), "The Argument" and "The Reference Shelf."

Include text links throughout the story. At the end of the story, include links to other resources for readers who want to go deeper. These may be other stories on your own site; links to special reports or resources; or links to other external resources.

EXAMPLES

- BBC News Explainers http://www.bbc.com/news/explainers
- Bloomberg QuickTake http://www.bloombergview.com/quicktake
- The Economist Explains http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains
- Vox.com's Card Stacks series http://www.vox.com/cardstacks
- Slate.com's Explainer series: http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/explainer.html

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