

# 6

## Designing pages

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Once copy has been allocated to a page, someone is going to have to design it; to decide on the amount and type of display and how the page will be structured. Many of these decisions are taken by the editor, production editor or chief sub-editor. These executives will have already discussed in conference which of the stories will lead the page and approximately how it should be handled – a major splash treatment for an important story or just tucked down the middle of the page with something above it if it is not so significant? These decisions are important because even at this display level we need to be truthful with the readers. Giving a weak story major splash treatment is to oversell it. The reader is likely to end up confused – the display suggested the story was important and it turns out that it wasn't. There is an area of science called false alarm theory that shows that constant false alarms reduce a person's trust in an alarm system. There is no reason to suppose this does not apply to newspapers and magazines as well, and so if we keep saying that something is a great story and it turns out not to be, the reader will end up not trusting the paper and will therefore probably take another. So what could we do instead? Well, we could offer them value for money. Give plenty of stories and pictures on that page – all interesting but none of them heart-stopping. Many magazines do this with their news pages. None of the news is startling – it is all about an area of interest – new products, manufacturing changes, latest techniques or inventions, handy tips or gossip. All of it is of interest to the target group and a couple of busy pages filled with small items and pictures can give a lot of information and reader satisfaction.

The daily conference of newsroom executives may have decided the lead, and possibly the main picture story. Other stories on the page will be selected by the chief sub, probably in some sort of order. The chief sub will then brief the designer, explaining how the copy should be handled. The chief sub may well offer far more copy than can be fit on the page and so it is then up to the designer to decide on the amount of copy required and the amount of display material. Sub-editors can then be instructed about the length of copy required for each page.

## THE TRADITIONAL METHOD

Although most newspapers and magazines are made up on computer desktop publishing systems such as Quark Xpress or Aldus Pagemaker it is still worth discussing the traditional method of designing pages. This is partly because there may still be some places that do not use computer systems and partly because the traditional ways often have something to teach us.

When pages were still made up by compositors, either in metal in the composing room or with photocomposition on light tables, journalists and designers had to produce a draft of the way the page should look. This had to be very detailed to ensure there could be no mistake about the design. It would show where the copy was to go, it would detail the headlines and give their sizes and it would mark up where the pictures should go and their sizes. Often this detailed draft would be preceded by a rough visualisation of the page, particularly if the page was complicated or was a busy feature page (news is often easier to design as there is just a series of news 'blocks' or 'modules' to be put together).

This page visualisation is extremely useful in helping to grasp scale and to provoke ideas. Original ideas in design, as in writing, are paramount. Original pages that work and stay in house style (approximately at least) are what set apart good publications from ordinary ones.

In my experience, beginners, whether students or practitioners, find the idea of a visual difficult. I always insist that students produce a visual first, but often they try to avoid this and go straight onto the computer. I am convinced that they are hoping that their nervousness at being faced by a pristine piece of paper which they have to turn into a page of a publication will vanish on the computer and that it will magically do the work for them. Certainly their first stumbling attempts do appear to look more professional on the computer – they're bound to! However, it can take them an hour to lay in their first couple of stories on the computer and then when they find the design doesn't work, they have to scrap it and start again. Producing a visual – once you have some experience – takes only a few moments. If the plan doesn't work, it can be thrown away and a new attempt made, building on what was learned from the failed attempt.

The visual can be produced on a piece of scrap paper (see Figure 6.1). This does not need to be very big and is only intended to work out the main elements of the page and give a rough idea of fit and scale. These visuals will not only help you to work out how it will fit but should spark off ideas that will make the page more attractive and interesting.

In the traditional office, the visual would have been replaced by an accurate representation of how the page should look when it is finished, but in a computerised office, this is not necessary and when you are happy with the

general feel of the page, you can start laying out the frames on the page in the computer.

Whether you are doing a visual for a traditional office or a computerised office always check that you have the right adverts for the page, that they are the right size and that they have been drawn to the right size. There is nothing worse than drawing up a page and then finding that an ad marked as three columns was clearly marked 4×12. Once you are sure you have all the ads and any other items such as mastheads and blurbs in the right place you can start drawing – using pencil!

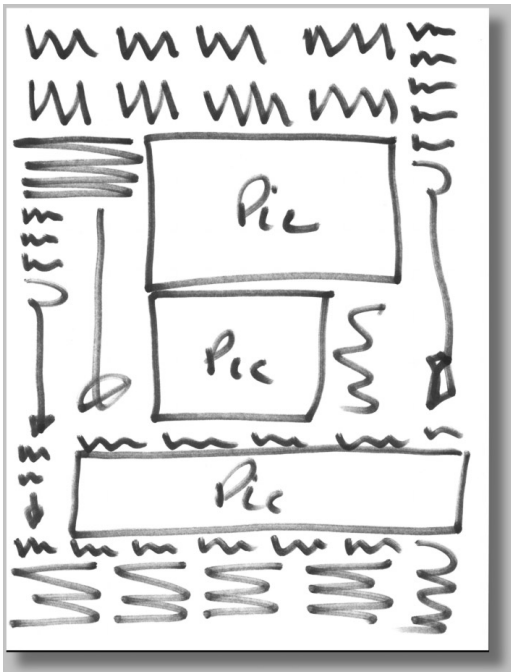


Figure 6.1 A visual: a quick sketch to try ideas, see how the page might look and get a sense of scale

The visual is there entirely to help you get clear in your mind how the page should look. Although any old scrap of paper can be used, it's probably better to use a piece of A4 so that it is similar in proportions to the page you will be designing. Using a piece of paper smaller than the final page means that you will be working on a scaled down version and this can be a bit confusing at first. The smaller size of the visual makes the page look different to the finished item. This is something you will need to get used to as you will often work on the page on computer at about this size. Very few screens are able to show you the whole of a tabloid page at full size. You must either see only a section of the page or switch to full page view which will reduce the scale of the page to as little as 25 per cent. However, if you find it very difficult to cope with the difference in scale,



A page draft is different to a visual in that a draft should be an accurate representation of the page you are designing to enable someone else to make the page up. A draft is used when a compositor is producing the page either on computer or in traditional hot metal or photocomposition. It is unlikely that this will happen in many publications in the US or UK, but there are still plenty of places in the world using this tried and tested technology. Remember – if something can be read the wrong way on a draft it will be. Make sure you label everything clearly and accurately.

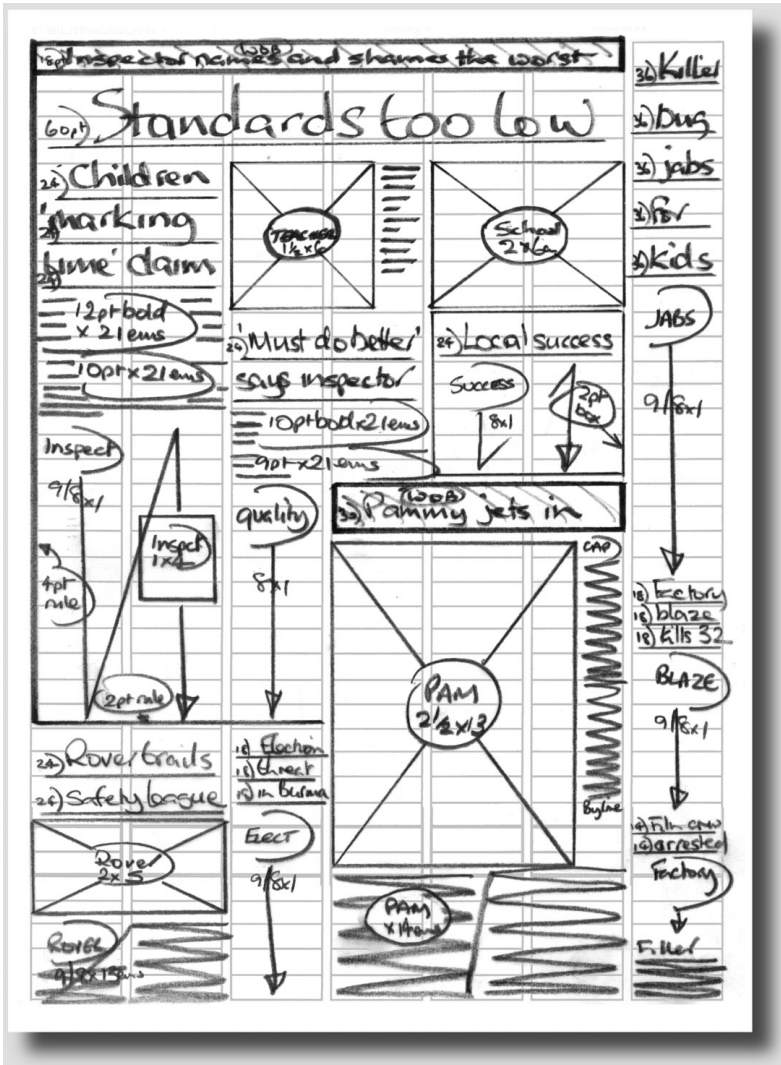


Figure 6.3 A page draft. Note that all the detail required is listed: headline and picture sizes and so on

It is important to produce a good quality draft (see Figure 6.3) in order to cut out mistakes and misinterpretations. The page should fit together accurately but this will not happen if your draft is sloppy. Make sure that you accurately measure the right space for pictures, graphics and headings. Headings are represented by a line running within the depth the heading will take. The heading size and style should be clearly written on the lines.

The actual heading can be added when the sub has written it. Non-standard measures and type sizes should be clearly marked. Single column runs can be marked by a single line, but jumps to another column should be clearly tracked. All captions, bylines and other type devices should be marked as well as rules and any other design elements.

The *catchline* of every piece of copy should be written within a circle over where it is to be placed. Pictures or any graphic are marked with crossed lines. At the centre a circle should be drawn to take the picture *catchline* and size. It is well worth writing the size and measure of any non-standard type on the page so that the *stone sub* can easily get it reset if it should go missing.

Remember: a draft must be accurate, and non-ambiguous. It has to be read against a deadline by someone who has no idea what you had in mind and maybe doesn't care.

Much of the same applies to a draft made on the computer. If you have a completely integrated system, the adverts will already be on the page (or at least the space for them). If the system does not automatically connect with advertising, then you will have to check again that you have planned in the right size adverts. You can then insert the frames according to the design in your visualisation, making detailed changes as necessary. You can also add additional material as needed. Once the frames are in place, the copy can be placed after subbing, the headlines written and the pictures edited. Once last-minute adjustments have been made and the page has been fully checked, it can be sent for plate-making.

## FIRST STEPS

Just as the first few words of a story are the most agonising to come up with while you debate how best to sully the framed bright whiteness of the computer screen, so the first tentative lines of a design are usually the most stressful and difficult. It can help to run through your mind what type of stories you have to display on the page, their relative merits and any weighting the chief sub has asked you give them.

Write the stories down in a list and consider them. How much copy is there and what are your instructions about its use? Do they have any pictures to illustrate them? If so, are they any good? Could you find some more pictures?

*Example 1:* You have been given the following copy for a newspaper news page:

Story	Length	Instructions
Family home blaze – no deaths	26 cm	lead story with pix
Council to change planning system	19 cm	2nd lead no pix
Presentation of safety award	7 cm	presentation pic of 6 people
Road crash – non-fatal	15 cm	no pix
Assault case at court – man jailed	24 cm	down page story
Assorted fillers		

The length in the example above refers to the length of the copy if the type is set in the standard house style over a standard column width. The art of *casting off* is no longer the essential skill of the sub-editor. Before copy was directly set on computers, subs would get the stories on type-written sheets from the reporters. These would be edited and then *cast-off*: the sub would calculate how many words of copy there were and how much space this would fill at a certain type size. Subs would often keep charts (handy reckoners) detailing the space a certain number of words would fill. Standard 8pt body size over a 10.5 pica-em column might allow 16 words per column centimetre. On that basis 160 words would fill 10 cm and 320 words would take 20 cm. Accurate casting off was important otherwise when the page was put together in the composing room, the story might be shorter than the space allotted, or, worse still, longer. If a story was short, then a small filler would be inserted in the space. One of the regular jobs on the subs desk of a newspaper at the start of the shift would be to send a number of small news items to be set as fillers. They would be used only to fill up gaps on a column where the copy was short.

A column that was over-length would require cuts and this was the job of the stone-sub – a sub who worked on the *stone* (the working area in the composing room). This sub would work with the compositors, making cuts, checking the right material was going on the right page in the right place, that pictures were the right way up and that headlines said what they were supposed to say. The computer has made most of this work superfluous, because the necessary checks can be made by the sub who designed the page. In theory, making cuts on an over-length story should have been easy. The story should have been subbed so that the last paragraph, and if necessary, the penultimate paragraph could just be removed. But of course, it was not always that simple.

Although casting off is no longer an essential skill, having a reasonable idea of the kind of space a story requires still makes the job of designing pages much easier. It is worth finding out how many words will fit into a column centimetre

in the standard type of your publication. You will then be able to quickly calculate that a 460 word story will fill 29 cm at, for instance, 16 words per col/cm.

The instructions column in Example 1 above shows the instructions given by the chief sub to the designer. In this case, as the lead story and pictures are potentially good, you will want them to dominate the page. If the story had been weak (the blaze perhaps only a small affair with no-one hurt) then the chief sub might have wanted to give other stories a more equal treatment.

It is not vital that the lead story be placed at the top of the page – this is a tradition that is upheld more by laziness than any other reason. What we are seeking to do is provide the reader with an *entry point* – a way of getting into the page. This entry point could be the heading for the story lead, but is more likely to be a picture. According to research carried out by the Poynter Institute in the US: ‘When the reader enters a page, attention is drawn to no predetermined position. Instead . . . the reader’s attention focuses first on the dominant visual element’ (Garcia and Stark 1991: 26).

This means that if we wish to draw the reader into the page at the bottom or in the middle, we can do so provided we offer the reader a suitable visual cue such as a large and dominant headline or picture or a bright splash of colour. This is a technique that is often carried to extremes on the front of some of the tabloids which will have just a picture and a headline with the copy carried on the following pages.

We traditionally read text from top left to bottom right and some of this habit continues when we read newspapers, but we actually start to read at the entry point.

To return to our example, the house blaze is the main story and there are no other stories for that page that can compete with it for newsworthiness and so there is no reason to break from the tradition of taking the story to the top of the page. We also have some pictures to go with the story and we can use these with the headline to provide a strong entry point to bring the reader straight to the story we want them to read first, because we think it is the most significant.

When designing pages, often the temptation is to run all the stories at similar prominence, but this rarely works well and merely offers flat and uninspiring pages that are difficult for the reader to navigate. If we can’t decide which story is the most newsworthy and which the reader ought to look at first, we might as well give up design and run the stories one after another with only a few cross-heads to separate them. By choosing one story to dominate the page and using the other stories to support that, we offer the reader a page that is attractive, logically structured and easy to navigate offering entertainment, information

and value for the cover price. That doesn't mean that we have to make all lead stories the same size though. If a story is a big news item, we would give it more display than a lead that was not very interesting. Talking about using the same style of design and weight of lead heading day after day, revolutionary *Daily Mail* editor Mike Randall said: '... by slavish adherence to it you cannot avoid the false emphasis it gives. . . . The whole system creates a straightjacket from which you cannot escape' (Hutt 1967: 46).

In this instance, the story is strong (a house blaze is always good copy for a local paper, fire and flood are about the worst disasters that can happen to householder) and there is no problem about making it dominate the page, but sometimes a story is not so strong. We still need to make such a lead dominate the page, but we can make other stories come close to that dominance by running the lead in the centre of the page or down one side, or even by putting it at the bottom of the page. That way we avoid the asymmetricality of several similarly displayed stories on a page, without allowing the story we have chosen to lead the page to completely dominate the page when other stories are as good. The other stories might not get the display, but they do get good position. We need to develop a hierarchy on pages that assists readers and guides them through the material we are offering.

You should next consider how much space you are going to give the lead story. The average tabloid page is approximately 38 cm deep (although this can vary from 36 cm to 42 cm) with approximately 36 cm depth of useable space. This will often be nominally spread over seven columns. This gives 252 column centimetres of space per page. If we were to give our lead story a heading of two lines over six columns each at 72pt, this would take 36 col/cm of space. A picture of 4 columns by 10 cm deep would take another 40 col/cm and we have 26 cm of copy. A second picture of three columns by 8 cm would add 24 cm and then we need to add 8 cm for bylines, captions and so on. This very basic design (see Figure 6.4) would take 134 col/cm filling 53 per cent of the page – more than half the space available on the page for one story. As you will see from the design, the first column has space under the double column intro. It is tempting to incorporate this space into the lead story display by adding another heading or putting a small picture at the bottom of the double column text area. The alternative is to run some of the filler stories in that space, perhaps boxed off from the lead story.

The design section for this lead story is traditional and straight-forward. However, the two-line heading, double column intro and pic give a clear entry point. The reader's eye is drawn into the pictures, easily follows up to the bold, strong headline and then to the double column intro which is obviously where they are expected to start reading. The captions and bylines are tucked into the space left alongside the three column picture. This copy could be placed to the

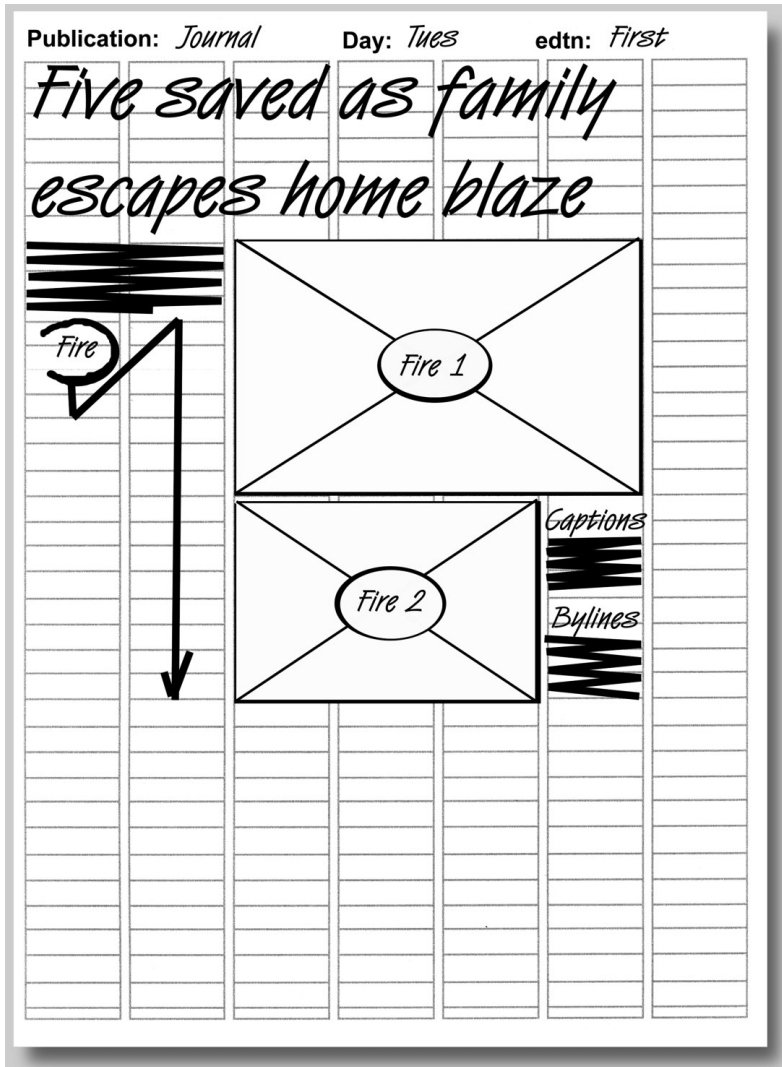


Figure 6.4 The visual is started with the lead story

left of the three-column picture and that picture moved to the right by one column, but this will place the captions next to the copy and look ugly. By pulling the smaller picture to the centre of the page and surrounding it by text associated with the story, the entry point is emphasised. The entry point to the story (as opposed to the page) is further emphasised by setting it in bigger and bolder type across two columns. This makes it clear where the reader should go in order to start reading the text. We can ensure the captions stand with the pictures by setting the type in bold ragged right. This will mean the right-hand

side of the text would be unjustified and this will put more white space between it and the story on its right. To further separate it, a line can be drawn from the top picture down and then left to the bottom picture surrounding the text and holding it next to the pictures to which it refers.

Having chosen our lead story and page entry point, it is now much easier to determine what to do with the rest of the page. We have a story that the chief sub wants to be second lead (the next most important story on the page) and another picture. There is also a court case. None of these sound particularly attractive. The picture is of an award presentation, important to the participants, but a big yawn to the rest of us. The second lead is a council story – an important matter of record, but not exciting – and the court case is fairly run-of-the-mill.

We need to consider the next entry point. Where do we want the reader to go next? Although the picture of the awards is boring, we are obliged to use it and so it needs to be of a reasonable size. The only place to put something this large is under the lead. We could take the picture right to the bottom of the page, but placing pictures along the edges of pages is rarely a good idea, pictures draw the eye and there is a risk that reader's eye will then slip out of one page onto another. In any case, putting the picture at the bottom would require us putting something in between the lead and the picture, which would be difficult to do. The easiest way around this problem is to put something else at the bottom of the page – an *anchorpiece*; a story spread across the bottom of the page holding the bottom together. A risk of a newspaper page without an anchorpiece is that there are several stories like dangling legs of text at the bottom. This can give the page a frayed look as though it is unravelling. By putting an anchorpiece across the bottom, either boxed or unboxed, we can gather those dangling legs neatly together. The court case is ideal for this (see Figure 6.5). We can spread this story over six columns, setting the text into four or five columns of *bastard* setting. A single line heading across all six columns in a modest size (36pt to 48pt) will firmly hold the bottom of the page together.

The second lead can now be dropped from the top of the page down the right-hand single column (see Figure 6.6). Five lines of 36pt or 42pt should be strong enough (although this will only allow four to five characters, not an easy headline to write – I've only recently forgiven the sub who once asked me to write a six-line heading at three characters per line). This, with the 19 cm of text, will drop to about where the lead story ends. It is worth matching these up, even if it means cutting a few words from the second lead story.

We can now run the awards picture under a six-column single line light heading under the lead (see Figure 6.7). The text can run in the single column space on the bottom far right. We should consider whether the copy would be run in bold or roman or even if it should be set in the caption font. Ragged right is another thing to consider.

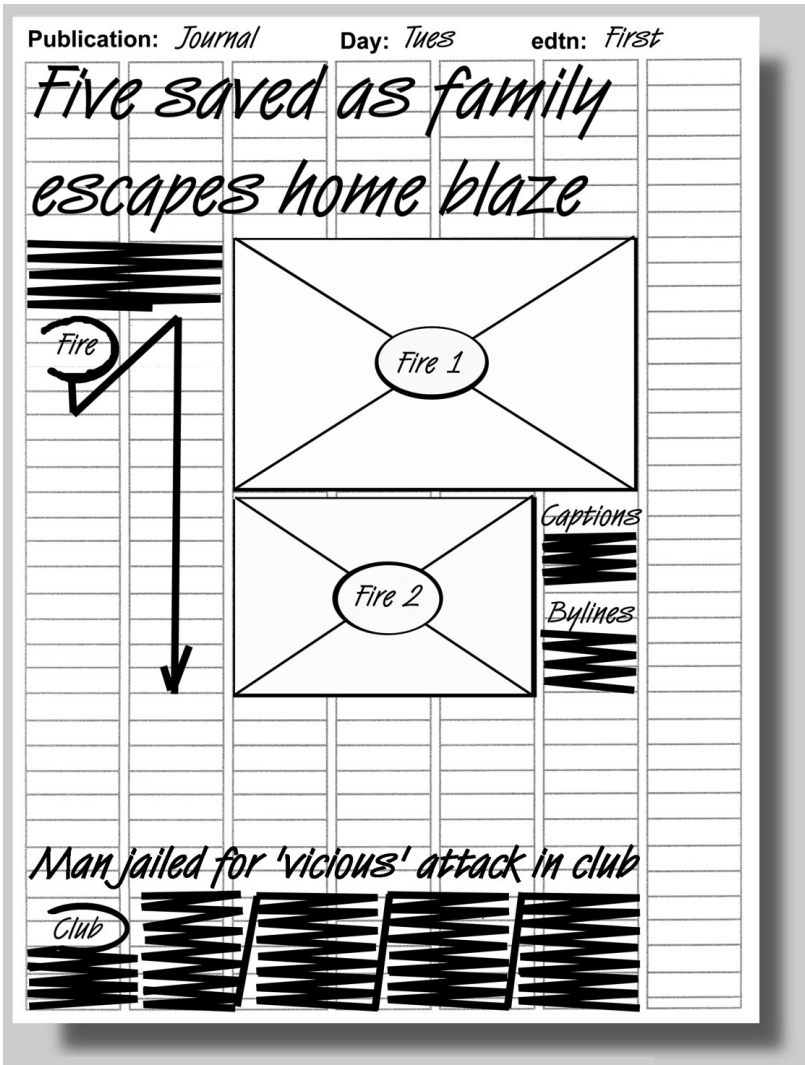


Figure 6.5 Now an anchorpiece is added to tie up the bottom of the page

Finally we fill the single column space below the left-hand side of the lead intro with the report on the car accident filling up with as many fillers as we need, to provide a short news-in-brief column down the left hand side. The full page can now be viewed in Figure 6.8. Having drafted it out on paper with pencil does not take that long (an experienced designer would have pencilled in a draft like this in two or three minutes). It takes far longer to explain than to do.

Take a good look at the page: the story count is fine – there are seven items on the page and it is lively and active. Good entry points are provided with the

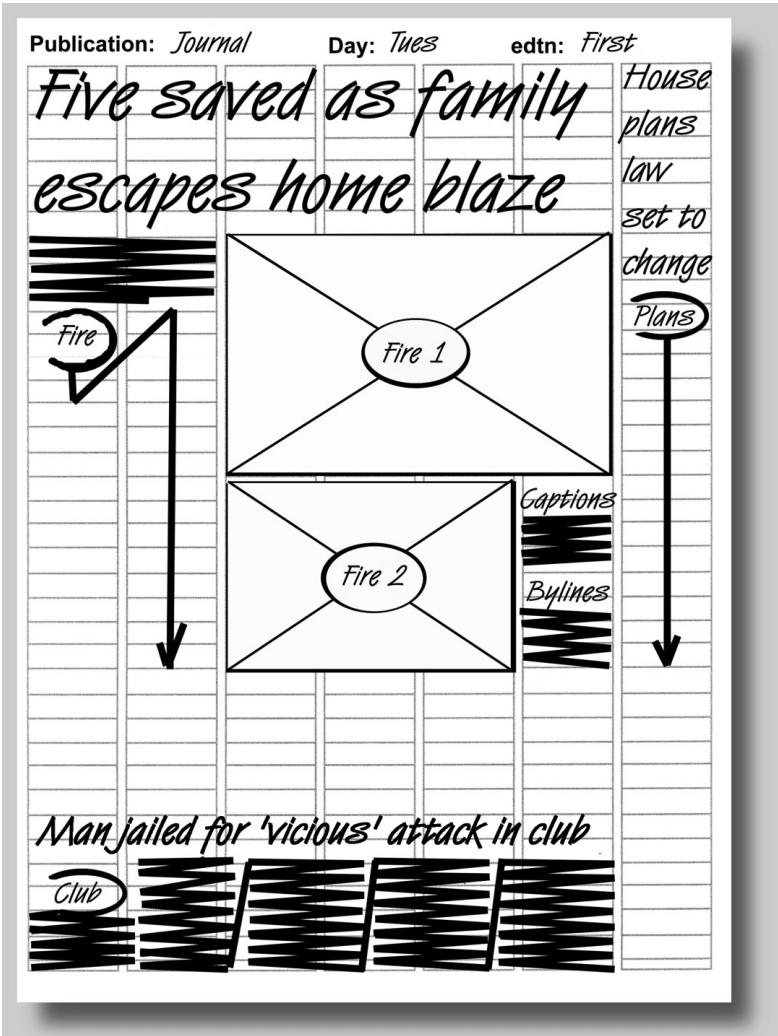


Figure 6.6 The second lead fills the right-hand column

three pictures. But is the awards picture too big? Does it dominate the page when that should be the lead story's job? Probably not. Although it is fairly dominant, the two pictures above it are stronger. It takes up more space than it is worth, but any smaller and it would be impossible to identify the people in the picture.

However, if the picture had been given too much display, this would have been obvious in the visual. Scribbled out on a piece of paper in only a couple of minutes, it only takes a couple of seconds to screw it up and bin it before replacing it with a sketch that takes account of that discovery. The amount of

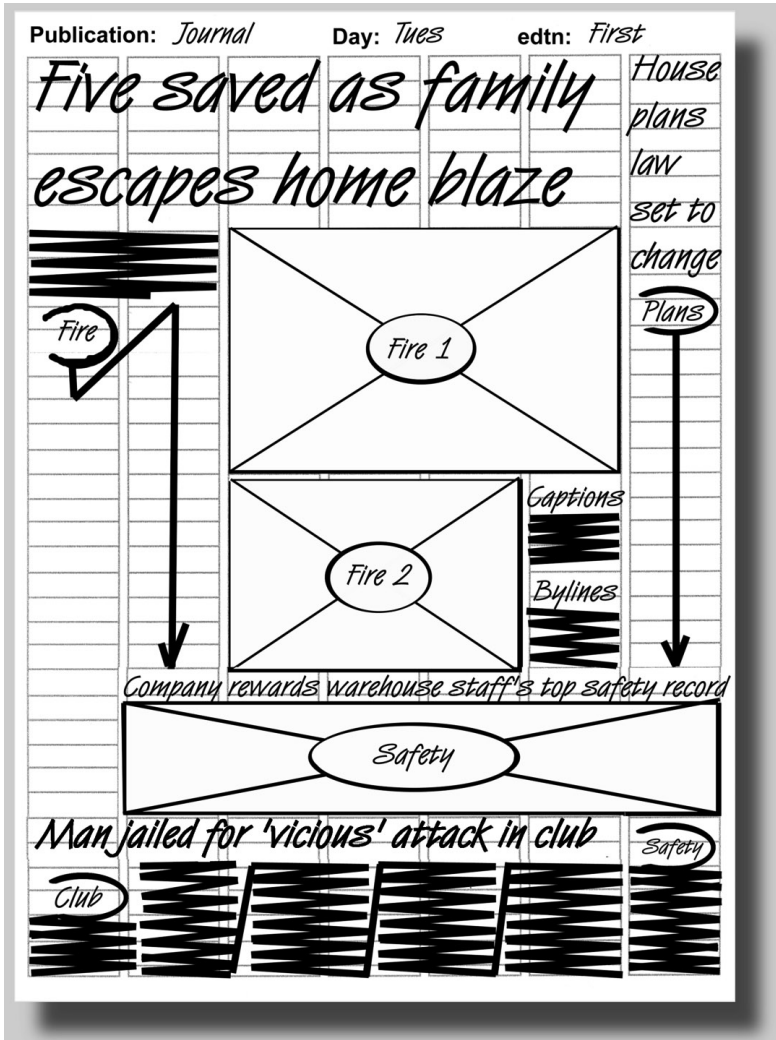


Figure 6.7 The picture story is added. The picture contains 30 faces and so is very wide and shallow

effort invested in the original draft is minimal, and in any case the time is not wasted, because it was possible to go on to produce a better version. But if you had spent up to an hour doing this on computer, laying in the text and sizing the pictures, you would be far less keen to change the page – there would have been too much time and effort invested, but an attempted redesign at this stage would probably fail to produce what’s needed. Working with paper and pencil in the first instance to produce quick visuals makes sense and saves effort. Only start laying out on the computer when you are sure you’ve got it right.

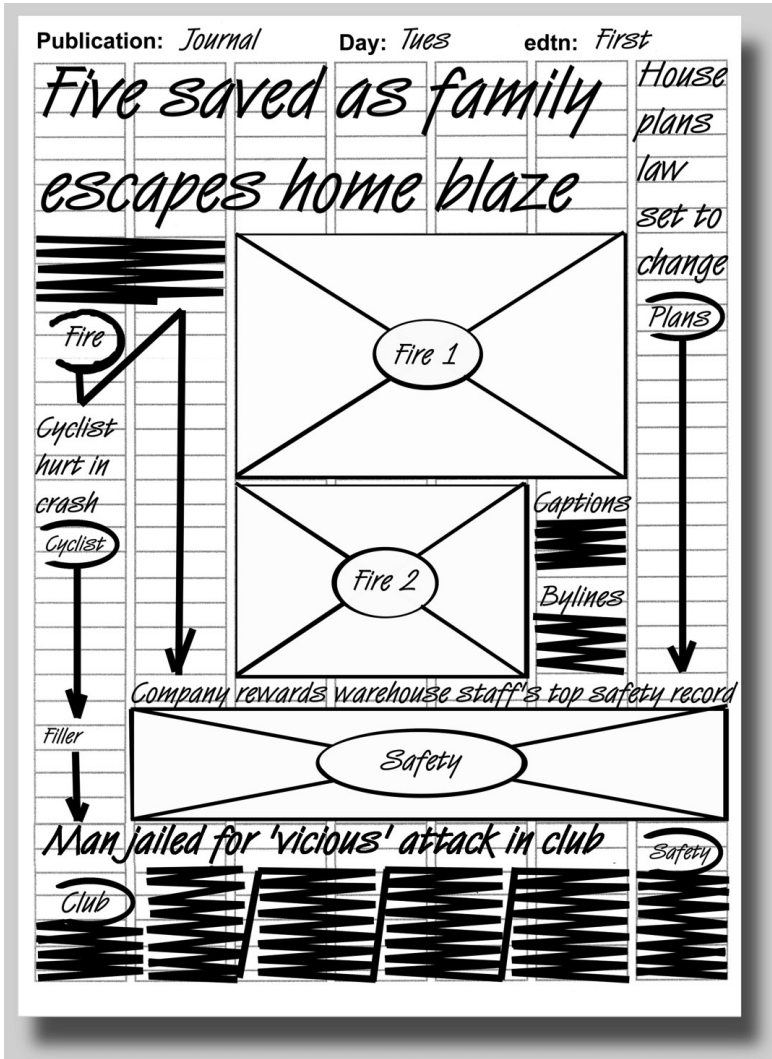


Figure 6.8 The final design with fillers in the column below the lead

### FEATURE AND MAGAZINE PAGES

These are not so different from a news page, except that there may only be one piece of text. Again the starting point should be the entry point. This is fairly obvious for us – there is only one story and we want the reader to start at the beginning, but we still need to signal this to the reader by use of the picture and heading. This means the picture must dominate the page and one of the easiest mistakes to make as a beginner is to use too small a picture. Figure 6.9 shows a