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Writing News Features

By

Murray Masterton
Writing news features

After the struggles and justifications of interpretive journalism, working out the requirements for a news feature article seems to be easy. For many it is, for others the ease is a cruel deception. Too many reporters who are asked to expand their news reports into feature material consider it as just that, a simple, uncomplicated expansion. That is not what a feature is, and that is why feature writing seems to be confined to a few people on every staff. I would be surprised if the situation is different in Southeast Asia.

It shouldn't be a surprise to find that most reporters like most to report. They thrive on the pressure of gathering and writing the elements of a report to a tight deadline. Give them more time to gather more material for a backgrounding article and they are lost. They either can't or won't do it, or they have to rethink the whole purpose of their journalism.

What is a feature and in what way does it differ from everyday news?
To begin with a feature is usually much longer. There are long news reports, even serials which run for days or weeks, even months, but each day's appearance is a news report, not a feature. The clearest comparison comes from broadcasting, where the distinction is between news reporting and longer (feature) current affairs items. The comparison is:

While the news reporter is out reporting the latest fire, the current affairs (feature) reporter is at the fire headquarters finding out the reasons for so many fires and what can be done to prevent more.

It's not a perfect definition of current affairs any more than it defines feature article, but there is no definition that is absolute for much in the world of journalism. It is good in that it points out the major difference as one of intent. A news report tells what happened; a feature may explain why it happened, or why it happens so often or why it will happen again, or all three, and what can be done by whom to prevent it.

A news feature puts news information into context: it aims to help the reader understand more about the subject in question. Features can be about any subject, but news features find the "pegs" from which they originate in the news columns. Other types of feature, just as valid and just as readable but inspired by something other than the news, appear in newspaper Lifestyle, Mode or Living sections, or in special segments devoted to motoring, gardening, fashion, real estate or travel. Or they appear in magazines.

News features don't have to be as immediate as the news, though they must be allied to the news and not so old they become irrelevant. Many are syndicated by agencies specialising in marketing news features. This disappoints some journalists who think they should be writing the backgrounders for their own papers. If they are truly enthusiastic, there are many interesting and directly relevant articles in their own locality and their newspaper will be pleased to publish them, if they are good enough.
Look at any daily newspaper, or even at a weekly, and you will find the starting material for anything between a dozen or double that number of news features. They may not be obvious to everyone, but they are there. The better you know the newspaper's region and its audience the more alert you will be to the articles.

Because we are in Singapore I use the Straits Times of Monday, May 8 as an example. Look at the items on page 1 alone.

1) Prime Minister Goh told a Trades Union Congress meeting that workers who are willing to be retrained will always get a job in Singapore.

2) Car talks between Japan and the US -- an overseas story.

3) Malaysia to fine and jail drunker drivers from July.

4) 7 hurt after woman trying to park crashes through window -- overseas.

What questions would you ask, and of whom, to find a feature rising from the first news report. It might not be profitable to ask Mr Goh, or to question his enthusiasm or intentions. But his advisers who provided him with the information are worth a question or two.

a) what is the brief history of the unemployment situation in Singapore?

b) has a retraining scheme been tried in Singapore before? When, and with what result?

c) which governments have tried similar schemes elsewhere? (To my knowledge Australia, New Zealand, Canada and some European countries) To date none has been markedly successful.

d) In what ways is the Singapore scheme different?

e) Why should the scheme succeed here when it not elsewhere?

If you want to go further and work out some of your possible sources:

f) the Prime Minister's advisers might tell you where they got their facts and figures to write such a speech.

g) the Department of Labour or Employment will give you figures for unemployment if you don't already have them in your newspaper files.

h) the embassies or high commissions of other countries should be able to provide details of their own retraining schemes and on their level of success. With provided details you could work this out for yourself. Be careful that the information you are given is properly sources, and make sure you attribute to those sources.
b) employers and employees or their organisations will happily tell you what they think is right or wrong with the retraining scheme. They can probably make the necessary comparisons with overseas schemes, since they keep abreast of such matters in their own interests.

All this presupposes that you want to write a genuine news article. There is no presupposition that you are writing to support or to criticise the intended retraining programme, and that is the way to keep it. If the facts show that it is a great idea, that will come through in your report. If they show that it is not such a good idea, that will also come through without you stressing the point.

On to item 2, about the car talks between the US and Japan. Since Singapore manufactures no cars and the outcome of the talks will have little effect on this city state, features on this are truly best left to the pundits who write for overseas agencies. By producing for a worldwide audience they can offer your newspaper a better article than you can and at half the price. What they can’t offer is the local angle. If you can think of a local angle to this story, then you have a local article which your editor will prefer to the agency material.

Item 3: the Malaysian rules against drinking and driving. It is easy to find a local angle here, for Singapore or anywhere else. The questions to be asked and answered are simple:

a) what is the accident situation in Singapore (your home country)?

b) how many of the accidents/fatalities are the result of alcohol?

c) what is your present law to control this situation?

d) how well is it policed and if not well enough, why?

e) where else have the same or similar measures been tried and how well had it worked? (Australia is one such comparison and it has worked spectacularly well).

f) are the Singapore authorities (or your own) considering any action?

The sources of the information you need suggest themselves, but more on sources later.

The 4th item is also from overseas, but it is one which might have a local angle if you wish to push hard enough.

a) how often do accidents happen through this type of confusion (pressing the wrong pedal in the car)?

b) what kind of people make that type of mistake?

c) what kind of vehicles are most often involved?
d) is there a dominant time or place for this type of accident?

e) are there plans to do anything about it?

It was this type of unlikely accident report that started major consumer-oriented feature writing in the United States. The book *Unsafe at any speed*, also run as a series of articles in many newspapers, told of the problems associated with one particular type of motor car, based on inquiries which followed accident reports. Another such follow up occasioned the manufacturers of a passenger aeroplane to make alterations to the locking device on its cargo door.

And that is just page 1, and only one suggested feature story from three of the four items on the page. There are many more inside, and some news items conceal two or more separate feature ideas.

Ideas are one thing; the facts to make them into an article are another. So far we have suggested starting questions and some possible sources for the answers. Facts don’t grow in your head like ideas, but to gather the needed facts there is a sensible sequence any reporter can follow. It not only speeds up fact gathering but will also improve the factual quality of your end product.

There is a sort of balance which is essential in all good articles: primary research (interviewing living people) will make your article live and give it colour, secondary research (the background from books and references) gives it authority and credibility. You can have more of one than the other, according to the subject matter involved, but you must have something of both. Without interviews your report will seem dead, even though it is informative and credible. Without properly researched background it will seem lightweight and of no consequence, hence without much credibility.

No matter what story you choose to write, or are asked to write, here is a short list of information sources every journalist should canvass before writing anything at all.

**Newspaper files:** If your newspaper has a library, use it. Newspaper libraries are your handiest source. The files will tell you what has been published before by your newspaper, and perhaps by some others, about the subject in question. In the case of the first retraining story you could look up retraining, unemployment, re-employment, and follow on from them to more precise subjects.

There is a trap in using newspaper files and it can occur in almost any story. Newspapers and those who work for them can get facts wrong; not so much the hard news facts because errors there are quickly pointed out by members of the public, but in quotes and reported opinions. There are many instances of a reporter using a file as a source and conscientiously including an earlier quote which was wrong but has never been corrected. All this does is perpetuate an error and make it even more likely that it will again be repeated.

**Other libraries:** Other libraries can help prevent this type of error occurring. Check your facts, where possible, with your municipal, school, college, university or even parliamentary library. Most libraries retain reference sections and it doesn’t take long to
find out what you want. The staff is usually, though not always, helpful. They like newspapers to be right and are pleased to help reporters who are obviously keen to do the same. Where they are not helpful is where reporters have wasted their time or done incompetent research in the past, or where the library is understaffed and has been instructed to meet demands from their own members only.

In the library reference section you will also find company lists, so you can find out, if it is part of your quest, who owns how much of which companies involved in your feature, or the history of those companies.

The reference section of the library should also have the books which are ideal for your own newspaper or subs room reference shelf, and many more. The subs ones have already been mentioned under Sub-editing. The others include encyclopaedias and reference volumes on specific subjects -- more detailed than any newspaper library need maintain.

Other sources in sequence: After checking the libraries and any other sources available in print and making effective notes on what you have found, start to look for contemporary sources. Who is there who can tell you what you still wish to know, both about the background for further credibility and the contemporary situation to give your writing life.

In the first of today’s examples you might choose to speak to

a) government officials responsible for the report

b) trades union representatives and

c) employer representatives, who will be able to direct you to

d) unemployed people who want retraining and even

e) unemployed who don’t want retraining. They must have reasons.

f) representatives of any other bodies, official or private, who will be affected by the programme.

This last one is an aspect which must always be borne in mind. The question of who will be affected covers those who will suffer by it as well as those who will benefit. Who might suffer by the retraining programme? Possibly those already working in the area for which retraining is offered, since they will face competition for their jobs and although they have experience they have no training or formal qualification. There may also be others.

While thinking of sources think of such places as the universities or colleges, where there are experts on staff in an immense variety of fields. Write them all down, even without specific contact names, and note beside each prospect what information or what kind of information you expect to get from that source.
Then, even before you set times and places for any of these interview question sessions, stop and think. You already have your secondary research done in the libraries and perhaps elsewhere. To get the most out of your primary research in face to face or telephone interviews, work out the best sequence in which you should gather them. There always is a best sequence, and anyone who has researched an article wrongly will agree.

What information do you need first, so you can ask someone else a question arising from it? That is the way you must think when working out what you sequence will be. Half an hour spent working this out will save much more than that later on, and perhaps the embarrassment of having to go back to one of your early interviewees with questions you could and should have asked at your first meeting. This will occasionally happen, so when you are thanking interviewees after the first interviews you should remember to reserve the right to return, or to phone later and check, if more information becomes available.

Of style and nature:

You may not speak to all the people on your list. Who and how many you interview and how much of their material you use will depend on the type of story you intend to write, its length and the nature of the publication for which it is intended. There is a difference in approach between articles intended for serious, so-called "responsible" newspapers and those which are written for papers referred to as "popular", even if the content may be much the same.

The difference is evident in the subjects chosen (there is a huge overlap), the style of language used and sometimes in the construction of the article itself. This is a normal journalism condition called writing for your audience.

Getting a start:

How does an article start? News stories begin with a lead that summarizes the story (summary lead) or one which stresses a specific aspect of the story which is significant (angled lead). Article writers have a wider choice. They can choose either of these and not be out of place, but it is more usual to encourage the reader into your feature by some other means.

The lead may be a teaser, which means it makes a provocative statement to attract attention and then explains or justifies it as the reader progresses through the story. Or you might choose to attract the reader by shock -- writing a lead which makes the reader say or think "Good gracious" and want to read on.

There are no rules for leads in features. The best lead is the one which best encourages readers to read what you write, but this doesn't mean you can go to ridiculous extremes. You dare not make statements in the lead which are not supported in the body of the report, though this happens often enough in pulp magazines. They try more diligently to win access to people's pockets than to their minds.
Nor are there hard and fast rules about construction of the feature story itself. As a rule the traditional news form of an inverted pyramid is not suitable and the reason denigrates neither the news process nor the article. News aims to deliver facts in a specific sequence and against a deadline and sometimes unknown space availability. The story, traditionally, had to be cuttable from the bottom. Hence the inverted pyramid. Features are not written that way. If they are well written they will not be cut at all, though they can still be subbed for improvement.

This means that once an article has used a catchy lead to attract the readers, it should follow the construction style which most logically follows that lead and best suits the material. If you wish to tell a feature story in the manner of an after-dinner yarn with the punch-line at the end, that’s fine, except that delaying a major part of the story in such a way is a difficult technique to master. It demands expertise in construction and a flair in the choice of words. It might be better to use a more normal construction until you are an acknowledged article specialist.

Sequential is one form which is popular. This means you tell your story in the chronology in which things happened. This is good when you have cause and effect to explain, because this is the natural flow of such information. It is also the way in which most people tell stories verbally.

Analytical might not sound like a construction formula but it can serve as one. If a story is appropriate for this approach you can begin with an apparently outrageous statement and then justify it or explain it by analysing step by step, and revealing the story on the way. This often works for explanatory stories about subjects like law, some scientific subjects about which readers are ill-informed but curious, or almost anything else abstract enough to allow you to make a “way-out” opening statement and get away with it.

Historical is another construction type. It sounds as if it is the same as sequential, and in some ways it is, but not necessarily. What is usually referred to as historical relies on an opening tied securely to some event in the past, usually a reader-catching event, and using this as a reference point for all or most of the events which have happened since. The end result is a short but readable historic background of the item you have chosen which explains its present condition.

Reflexive is more often used in novels and short stories than in news features, but it is a valid style for those who fancy themselves as structuralists. This occurs most in the writing of profiles, and more in profiles of people than of institutions. In a construction like this an event of the present or recent present is used to recall something from the subject or person’s past, thus revealing more of that person’s character, which is what the article is all about. Read any good profile in any quality newspaper’s weekend special and you will find an example of this construction.

Verbatim interview construction is not as popular as it was -- even construction forms have their fashions -- but it is still practised. This style of feature reporting began, by repute, in the American magazine Playboy, though it is hard to believe it was not used many times before in many different publications. In this construction, again stressing the profile but this time through the edited words of the person being profiled, the questions
are published and their answers follow, supposedly verbatim. In reality even Playboy did not claim that there had been no editing. Any astute reader will appreciate that no one, reporter or interview subject, speaks so perfectly.

There is a collective name which suits most of these construction methods. It is derived from broadcasting because broadcasting is based on the way people tell stories when they speak, which is increasingly the way journalists tell stories when they write news features. It is called Linear Construction for the simple reason that the story flows in a line. It begins at the beginning -- with whatever type of intro you choose to give it -- and it continues like someone telling a story, even rambling a bit where appropriate, until it reaches its logical end. When it does the story is over so it stops.

This means all the information the readers want or need to know is included, in the sequence most natural to the subject matter and construction form, and usually in a minimum number of words, commensurate with clarity. All the constructions listed as linear are more relaxed and flexible than the inverted pyramid, because features are a more relaxed part of the newspaper than the news columns. As long as you don’t take an equally relaxed approach to the way you write the article, any of these constructions will work well.

There is no room for relaxation on the part of the journalist. Just the opposite. The more diligent the writer in gathering the facts, assembling the sequence of their telling and then choosing the fluent words in which to tell them, the more relaxed and readable the article will seem. It is not a case of just taking more time to gather more facts and then writing them up as a longer news story. That is not a readable article. It is a long news item -- usually too long, since it can be cut.

A well written article in linear construction should be incapable of cutting. Any word which is not essential should not be there. Any word which is there should be essential from either a factual or emotive aspect as well as the structural aspect.

Construction offers you a myriad of options. The one you choose should be determined by the story you want to tell. Choose that which best fits your story. The language you choose may still be the language of news, as tight and precise as it can be. Because it is article writing you may have one chance per story to indulge in a "purple prose" sentence, but not much more. Article writing, like news writing, it not a literary exercise so much as imposing discipline on words and thoughts.

But if you are stylist enough to make those words and thoughts seem balanced, fluent and attractive, even poetic, then you have the makings of a great writer of feature material.