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Writing Newsfeatures

By

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0830-1000 Monday, December 13: WRITING NEWSFEATURES

After the struggles and justifications of interpretive and investigative journalism, discussing the writing of newspaper features seems deceptively easy. Too many reporters who are asked to expand their news reports into feature material look on it just that way, which is why feature writing seems to be confined to a few people on every staff. I'm sure it is the same way around the world.

What is a feature and in what way does it differ from an everyday news item?

To begin with, a feature story is usually much longer. There are long news stories, and there are serials which run for days or weeks, or even months, but each days appearance is a news report, not a feature. The best comparison I know is one that comes from broadcasting, comparing news reports with current affairs reports, which are in many ways the same as short features.

While the news reporter is out reporting the latest fire, the current affairs reporting is at fire headquarters finding out the reasons for so many fires and what can be done to stop them.

It's not a perfect definition of current affairs any more than it defines a feature article, but in the news world there is no definition that is absolute. But it's a good place to start, since it points out the most significant difference -- one of intent. The news report tells what happened; the feature explains why it happened, or happened so often, or will happen again, or perhaps what can be done to prevent it from happening again.

A feature therefore puts some aspect of the news into context. Its aim is to help the reader understand more about the subject in question. And features can be about almost any subject.

The subject I was asked to address is Newsfeatures, so I suppose this means features for newspapers and based essentially on some aspect of the news. There are many more types of features -- you see them in the Lifestyle sections of newspapers, or sections called Mode or Living, or perhaps in any special segment of a major newspaper such as motoring, gardening, fashion, real estate, travel.
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These are all features, though they are not necessarily derived from anything that appeared in the news recently, let alone that day. Many of them are syndicated by agencies which specialise in writing and marketing that type of material. This may be a disappointment to newspaper journalists who think they could write that type of material easily enough, but in reality there are plenty more interesting and directly relevant subject still to choose from. Just look in any day's news columns and there must be the starting material for anything between a dozen and fifty newsfeatures. They may not be obvious to everyone, but they are there.

Look at a newspaper page, in this case the front page of the GEELONG ADVERTISER of Wednesday, December 1. It is fairly representative of Australia's provincial daily newspapers -- mostly local news on the front -- but look carefully at the reports it carries, starting at the top.

The mining exploration story is a scoop for the paper. Imagine if a mining company in your own country suddenly wanted to reopen gold-mining operations in an historic mining village which has been no more than a tourist attraction since mining ceased a century ago. Reporter Garry Cotton includes more than the usual amount of background information in this story, but leaves a vast amount more for the reporter who wants to make a feature article about it. I would be the same everywhere.

What is there for a feature?
1) What other old mining towns are there in the region and how profitable were they?
2) What happened to cause mining to cease -- lack of gold, low price, other attractions?
3) What is known about Steiglitz (or the derelict town you are writing about) -- a bit of history?
   There is usually plenty of colour associated with a mining town.
4) What is known of the company that wants to restart the mining? Little is said in this story.
5) Why did Buninyong Mines, a local company, do nothing with its lease? Ask them.
6) What good or harm will renewed mining do to the area? Will it bring a financial boom or an ecological or conservation disaster, or perhaps both, and who says so?

There are many more questions, but this will serve to show that there is plenty of material to start on. In fact you can choose which approach to take -- the historical, which will provide a colourful profile of the old mining village and the people who lived and worked in it, with the details of the mining resumption added as if to justify the substance of the story, or the more contemporary questioning of whether mining should start, for financial, ecological or any other reason, and what the gains and losses will be if it does, and then go on to tell what happened to those who mined there a century ago.

And this is only the first story on the page. You can do the same to the rest of them. For instance:

Chemical spill scare concern (a terrible headline but a good story)
This is a recurring debate about whether a chemical storage depot at Coode Island, on the river front in Melbourne's docklands but also close to housing, should be moved to a safer purpose-built location at Point Wilson, 50km from Melbourne but just across the bay from Geelong.
The demand for the move arose from a chemical fire in the depot two years ago, but Geelong people argue that there is no reason they should accept the risk the people of Melbourne want to escape. But then Melbourne is the State Capital and carries more votes than Geelong, so it is a political decision. Imagine the same thing in your own area and think of the stories which can arise from this.

1) What has happened in other cities/countries with a similar problem?
2) What are the risks in moving chemicals by ship, train or road transport?

You can think of dozens of approaches to this story and there is a feature article in every one of them.

The centre picture story about headmaster Lewis from Australia's "top" school being appointed to Eton is just as fecund with ideas, not so much about the man, but about the schools involved, their history (in Eton's case a very long one) and traditions, the education systems of the three countries in the story (the man in question is a New Zealander, not an Australian).

Look at the front page of today's newspaper -- any newspaper on any day -- and you will find the same thing; news items with a host of ideas for feature articles. The problem is that once you have the ideas what can you do about them. Facts don't grow in your head like ideas. There is a sensible sequence a reporter can follow to speed up the business of feature writing and improve the factual quality of the product at the same time. Let's go back to the Steiglitz story and start checking the sources of information needed.

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

a) 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 paper, and perhaps others, about the subject in question. In this case the library will tell you what your newspaper has published about Steiglitz over as many years as the files exist. You can also look up gold-mining to see what other stories have been published recently, or perhaps check on the companies concerned to see if they have been in the news before and why.

There is a trap in using newspaper files, though it might not occur in a story like this. Newspapers and those who work for them can get stories wrong, not so much hard facts as quotes and reported opinions. There are many instances of a reporter going to the files and conscientiously writing into a new and supposedly authoritative feature information that was wrong in an earlier story and has never been corrected. All this does is perpetuate an error and destroy the credibility of the article.

b) other libraries can help prevent this. 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 information there. The staff is usually very helpful. They like newspaper stories to be right and are usually anxious to help reporters obviously keen to do the job properly.
The library reference section will also have company lists, so you can find out -- if you think you should -- just who owns the companies involved in this story and the history of those companies. You can take this a step further, if need be, by looking up *Who's Who*, though this volume may be in your own newspaper library.

c) your newspaper should also have a reference library of its own with information which can be tapped for all sorts of stories. In this case you might like to check on the local map, to make sure exactly where Steiglitz is, how far it is from anywhere else, what the country is like around there, where the water courses run. Your reference library should have such maps.

It should also have a short list of frequently used quick-reference books which may not be so useful in this story as they are in many others. A list of such books might include:

- a good dictionary, much more complete than those on every reporter's desk.
- a good atlas, no cheap but useful for at least ten years even in today's changing world.
- local maps of your home city and all the others within your circulation area.
- a full set of telephone books, certainly for the circulation region, probably for the country.
- the electoral roll, if such exists in your country.
- your country's Year Book, the book of authorised information published yearly or two-yearly.
- Book of Facts, any one of the annual volumes published by a dozen publishers.

If the newspaper wants to go further into the task of providing reliable source material you may consider

- a reputable multi-volume encyclopaedia, which is considerably more expensive, but very useful.
- Keesings Contemporary Archives, or some similar international archive which keeps up to date with which has happened everywhere, including your own country. This is also expensive, but invaluable for those who want to know what happened when, why, and who was involved.

But back to the article. After checking the library sources and any others available in print, and making effective notes on what you have found, start to look for contemporary and living sources. Who is there who can tell you what you still wish to know? You might decide that you need to speak to:

- the chairmen of the mining companies concerned.
- the local government head in the mining area.
- the conservation society or anyone else who may protest about mining being resumed.
- local people, if you can find them in the phone book or in person, to see what they think.
- technical experts, at the university or elsewhere, for opinions on everything from the geology of the area and the prospect of gold being found to the risks or benefits to the area and the nation.
- anyone who can tell you anything about the past that you have not found already.
You may not need to speak to all these people. Who and how many people you speak to obviously depends on the type of feature you intend to write, its length, and the nature of the publication in which it will appear. There is a difference in approach between most articles which in serious and so-called "responsible" newspapers and those which appear in newspapers referred to as "popular".

This difference is evident in the subjects chosen or the approach taken to them should both types of paper choose to write on the same subject. It is also evidence in the style of language used, though not so much. It is not evident in the construction of the article, since this seems to be much the same regardless of the publication concerned.

For instance, how does an article start?

News stories usually 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 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 can be a teaser, which makes some 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 encourages readers to read what you write, but this doesn't mean you can go to ridiculous extremes. You dare not make statements in your lead which the body of the story can not support, though this happens often enough in pulp magazines which try harder to win money from readers' pockets than to earn regard from their minds.

Nor are there hard and fast rules for the construction of the story itself, though as a rule the inverted pyramid structure of traditional newspaper news items is not suitable for an article. The reason is clear and it denigrates neither the news process nor the article. News aims to deliver facts in a specific and clear manner and reports written for news are written to be subbed from the bottom to make them fit -- hence the inverted pyramid style. Features are not written to be a cut at all, even though they may be subbed for their improvement.

This means that once an article has used a catchy lead to attract reader attention, it should follow the construction style which best suits the material. If you wish to tell it like an after-dinner yarn, so that the punch-line occurs right at the end, that's fine, except that putting the story down this way in writing is very difficult to master. It calls for expertise in construction and for flair in choice of words. Perhaps it is usually best to stick to a more normal construction.

Sequential is one form which is popular. This means you tell the story in the chronology in which things happened. This is great when you have cause and effect to explain, probably because this is the natural flow of that information, the way in which most people tell stories.
Analytical might not sound like a construction, but it can serve as one. If the 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 subject about which most readers are ill-informed and 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 type of construction. It sounds as if you should be sequential, and sometimes this will be so, but not necessarily. What is usually called historical relies on an opening tied securely to some event of 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.

Reflexive is more often used in novels and short stories than in news features, but it is a valid enough style for those who fancy themselves as structuralists. This occurs most in the writing of profiles, and more in profiles of people than institutions. In a construction like this an event of the present or recent present is used to recall something from the subject 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, but it is still a valid form of article. This style of feature reporting began, by repute, in the American magazine *Playboy*, though it is hard to believe that 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 almost all of these construction methods. Again it is derived from broadcasting because it is based on the way people tell stories when they speak. 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 and perhaps rambling a bit though not too much, until it reached its end. And when it has reached its end the story is over so it stops.

This includes all the information the readers or listeners need or want to know, in the sequence which best serves the story you are trying to tell. All the constructions listed here are linear, but an inverted pyramid, as often used in news, is not. So there is a more relaxed structural approach to feature articles, and as long as you don't take an equally relaxed approach to the way to construct the sentences within them, almost any construction will serve.
What you have to remember is that the construction offers you a myriad of options and the one you choose should be determined by the story you want to tell. Choose that which fits the story best. But the language you choose is still the language of news, as tight and precise as it can be. Feature writing may offer you one chance per story to indulge in a sentence of "purple" prose, but not much more. It still have to say as much as possible in as few as possible of the best-chosen, most precise words.

And if you are stylist enough to make those words seem balanced and attractive, even poetic in their appeal, then you are have the makings of a great writer of feature material.