

Writing For Media

Week 8 Features II

Types of Features

- Feature is an umbrella term for a number of soft news stories that profile, humanise, add colour, educate, entertain or illuminate.
- A feature is not meant to deliver news firsthand; it usually recaps major news that was reported in a previous news cycle.
- It can stand alone, or it can be a sidebar to the main story, the *mainbar*.

- The types of features include:
- Personality profiles
- Human interest stories
- Trend stories
- In-depth stories
- Backgrounders

(i) Personality profiles

- A **personality profile** is written to bring an audience closer to a person in or out of the news.
- Interviews and observations, as well as creative writing, are used to paint a vivid picture of the person.
- People enjoy reading about other people, which makes a personality profile one of the most popular features in today's media.
- Personality profiles contain multiple sources; that means the reporters can't simply interview the personality and then write a story: family members, colleagues, friends, enemies—people who know and like or don't like the personality—have to be interviewed so the feature does not come across as “me, me, me”.

(ii) Human interest stories

- A **human interest story** is written to show a subject's oddity or its practical, emotional or entertainment value.
- Example: how to repair a washing machine, or how people are coping in the city with the nation's highest unemployment rate.
- Travel writing fits into the category of *human interest*, although these pieces could also be trend or in-depth stories.

(iii) Trend stories

- A **trend story** examines people, things or organisations that are having an impact on society.
- Trend stories are popular because people are excited to read or hear about the latest fads.
- Examples include a look at the summer fashions, a new religion or the language of teenagers.

(iv) In-depth stories

- An **in-depth story**, through extensive research and interviews, provides a detailed account well beyond a basic news story or feature.
- It can be a lengthy news feature that examines one topic extensively; an investigative story that reveals the wrongdoing by a person, agency or institution; or a first-person article in which the writer relives a happy or painful experience.
- Examples include stories on cancer and how it has affected several families, how illegal immigrants get into the country and how one pop star made it to the top while another failed.

(v) Backgrounders

- A **backgrounder**—also called an **analysis piece**—adds meaning to current issues in the news by explaining them further.
- These stories bring an audience up-to-date, explaining how this country, this organisation, this person or whatever got to be where it is now.
- Examples include an analysis of the state death penalty shortly after a murderer is sentenced to death or a story explaining how the university food service won its exclusive contract.

Writing and Organising Feature Stories

- Guidelines in organising a feature story:
- *Choose the theme*: make sure that the theme is not too broad or too narrow.
- *Write a lead that invites an audience into the story*: a summary may not be the best lead for a feature. Do not make readers wait until the 10th or 11th para before telling them what the story is about.
- *Write clear, concise sentences*: sprinkle direct quotations, observations and additional background throughout the story. Paras can be written chronologically or in order of importance. Enrich your writing with details and vivid imagery.

- *Provide vital background information:* if appropriate, a para or two of background should be placed high in the story to bring an audience up to date.
- *Use a thread:* connect the beginning, body and ending of the story.
- *Use transition:* connect paras with transitional words, paraphrases and direct quotations.
- *Use dialogues when possible:* feature writers often use dialogue to keep a story moving. Good dialogue is like a good observation during a story. It gives the readers strong mental images and keeps them attached to the writing.
- *Use voice:* write in a style that reveals personality.
- *End with a quotation or another part of the thread:* a feature can trail off like a news story or it can be concluded with a climax.

Rewriting

- Seldom is the first draft of a feature story the one that makes it into print.
- Experienced feature writers know that the best writing usually has gone through rewriting one or more times.