

If you ask the question "how and why" things happen, then you probably like reading feature stories in newspapers and magazines. A news feature goes way deeper than the headlines – it explores an issue thoroughly. To write one requires plenty of research and interviewing. Yes, it takes some honest toil to create something worthwhile, but it's fun – especially once you see the result of all that hard work.

PE TIP SHEET NO. 23

How to Write a Feature Story

BY

John A. Giachino
Chair, FWEA Public Education Committee

Samuel Johnson wrote, "The two most engaging powers of an author are to make new things familiar and familiar things new." A feature story is a medium that can empower you to give new life to a well-known thing or illuminate an unheard of one. A good feature story is one where you can engage someone and you get to do all the talking. Yet readers are left with a feeling that they have just had a great "conversation" about a topic they've just learned a lot about.

What to Feature in a Feature Story

Features, although newsworthy, are not meant to deliver the news firsthand. They do contain elements of news, but their main function is to educate, to entertain and to enlighten. Features often are written with subject matter that presents the human interest side of the story. Think of the feature as the journalistic equivalent of an essay.

Types of Features

In-depth stories: Through extensive research and interviews, in-depth stories provide a detailed account well beyond a basic news story or feature.

Trend stories: A trend story examines people, things or organizations that are having an impact on society. Trend stories are popular because people are excited to read or hear about the latest rage.

Backgrounders: A backgrounder, also called an analysis piece, adds meaning to current issues in the news by explaining them further. These articles bring an audience up-to-date, explaining how an organization, a person, a program, happens to be where it is now.

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 vibrant picture of the person.

Human interest stories: A human interest story is written to show a subject's peculiarity or its practical, emotional, or social value.

Writing and Organizing Feature Stories

It's important to have a clear idea of what you are going to write about and what specific angle you will explore. Story mapping can keep you from wasting a lot of time doing research that you won't be able to use. For every general story idea, there are many angles, or ways the story can be handled. For instance, a story about The Everglades could talk about the plants and wildlife found there, its vast network of canals and diversion structures, the damage done to it by years of water diversions and agricultural runoff, the effects of encroaching development, the people that rely on it in one way or another for their livelihood, the ecotourism boom there, the efforts to restore it to its original splendor and protect it forever ...the list goes on and on. If you try to cover everything, you will have zero focus. Without a clear angle, the likely result after lots of hard work will be an amalgam of information that the reader will lose interest in wading through to find your "take home" message.

Narrow your idea down to a few main sub-topics. Choose sub-topics that relate logically and you will find it easier to focus your story. Let's say you are writing a feature on The Everglades. You might choose to focus on the ecotourism boom and the people that rely on it for their livelihoods. You may write about ecotours being done in the Glades, how the restoration efforts will affect the ecotourism industry and the people who encircle it.

Your next step is to brainstorm as many angles as you can within each sub-topic, the same way you did the main story idea. Ask yourself what possible details are there to touch upon. Given our Everglades topic:

Break down ecotourism: What's it about? Which segment of the population is engaged as ecotourists? Is ecotourism becoming too trendy?

Break down ecotours in the Glades: What types of ecotours are available in the Glades? Are they offered by mom and pop concerns or mega-corporations? Do the tours give ecotourists the chance to get up close and personal with the wildlife – to see the glow of the gator's eyes at night and become the main course for the mosquitos?

Break down the people whose livelihoods depend on the Glades: Do they have family roots in the Glades? Are they conservationist, consumerist or capitalist minded? Is the number of people involved growing or declining?

Break down the restoration efforts and resulting effects on ecotourism: The federal and state programs now underway, the current projects being constructed, the regulatory agencies involved, the intended results. Will ecotourism in the Glades be enhanced or damaged by these efforts?

Based on the angles you come up with, decide what the main angle for your story is. Maybe you'd decide that the Everglade story's main focus would be to explain the importance of ecotourism through the eyes of a person whose livelihood has depended on the tourist industry and has seen various Glades tourism trends come and go.

Organization

Follow these guidelines:

- ◆ Start with a premise or theme.
- ◆ Present information and opinions that back you point.
- ◆ Bring the reader to a conclusion.

Here are the steps to use when organizing a feature story.

Choose the theme. Ask yourself these questions when choosing a theme: Has the story been done before? Is the story of interest to the audience? Does the story have holding power (emotional appeal)? What makes the story worthy of being reported? The theme answers the question, "So what?"

Write a lead that invites an audience into the story. A summary may not be the best lead for a feature. A lead of one or two paragraphs often begins a feature and grabs the reader. Rather than put the news elements of the story in the lead, use the first two or three paragraphs to set a mood, to arouse readers, to invite them inside. Then provide the news hook or the significance of the story in the third or fourth paragraph. Because it explains the reason the story is being written, this paragraph, sometimes called the "so what" or "nut" paragraph--is a vital component in every feature. The nut paragraph should be high in the story. Do not make readers wait until the 10th or 11th paragraph before telling them what the story is about.

Write the middle and the end. The body provides vital information while it educates, entertains, and emotionally ties an audience to the subject. The ending will wrap up the story and come back to the lead, often with a quotation or a surprising climax. Important components of the body of a feature story are background information, the thread of the story, transition, dialogue, and voice.

Provide vital background information. If appropriate, a paragraph or two of background should be placed high in the story to bring the audience up to date. Write clear, concise sentences. Sprinkle direct quotations, observations and additional background throughout the story. Paragraphs can be written chronologically or in order of importance.

Use a thread. Connect the beginning, body and conclusion of the story. Because a feature generally runs longer than a news story, it is effective to weave a thread throughout the story, which connects the lead to the body and to the conclusion. This thread can be a single person, an event or a thing, and it usually highlights the theme as with the case of the Glades story told through the eyes of someone whose livelihood depends on ecotourism.

Use transition. Connect paragraphs with transitional words, paraphrases, and direct quotations. Transition is particularly important in a long feature examining several people or events because it is the tool writers use to move subtly from one person or topic to the next. Transition keeps readers from being jarred by the writing.

Use dialogue when possible. Feature writers, like fiction writers, often use dialogue to keep a story moving. Don't make up dialogue. Listen for it during the reporting process. Good dialogue is like good

observation in a story. It gives readers strong mental images and keeps them attached to the writing and to the story's key players.

Establish a voice. Another key element that holds a feature together is voice, the "signature" or personal style of each writer. Voice is the personality of the writer and can be used to inject color, tone, and subtle emotional commentary into the story. Voice should be used subtly.

Conclude 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. Often, a feature ends where the lead started, with a single person or event.

Become A Feature Creature

I am sure that if you think about it, you can identify many topics affecting your organization that could illuminate in an entertaining and educational manner. Identify a topic you find compelling and write about it in a feature story. You will learn and will help others to learn, too.

John Giachino is a principal for Boyle Engineering Corporation and serves as regional director, client services for the firm. He is based in Orlando, FL

You can download a reprint of this and other PE Tip Sheets from the FWEA web site at <http://fwea.cnsusa.com/cms/index.cfm?primarykeylist=,234,248,266,1669,1675>