News features

Readers want hard news that tells them the “who,” “what,” “when,” “where,” “why” and “how” of events that are occurring in their communities. But, they also want to be entertained, to smile or cry, to learn and to sit back and truly enjoy a story. That’s where the news feature comes in.

You will combine news- and feature-writing techniques to write a story that informs readers about a news event while capturing their attention through the use of fiction-writing techniques that add color, dimension and emotion.

Most news events on your installations – deployments, accidents, banquets, special observances and awards, etc. – can be written in a feature format to provide the human side of the news.
Definition and purpose

A news feature is a perishable story that helps readers identify with the topic, event or situation in human terms. In addition to informing, news features entertain readers through creative writing, literary devices, vivid quotes and description. Readers may laugh, cry or have feelings of love, hate, envy or pity. While still newsworthy, news features are often less timely than hard news. In weekly newspapers, news features are often more appropriate because there’s more time to develop the human side of the news.

When news events happen, experienced journalists often instinctively look for news features to translate the cold, impersonal hard news accounts into human terms.
Hard news vs. news feature

Hard news stories list just the facts of a story – the “bones” of a story. News features are constructed with the same skeleton used in hard news, but there’s another layer stitched in that brings the story to life.

A hard news story is typically written in inverted pyramid style because something happened or will happen that is newsworthy. The facts and details in the story support the news peg. Most hard news stories begin with a summary news lead, followed by the facts of the news in descending order of importance.

A news feature has a news peg, but it also has a focus. The focus, which is reflected and supported in the lead, nutgrapth, body and conclusion, plays a dominant role in telling the story. The news feature has a “softer” lead designed to capture readers’ attention and pull them into the rest of the story written with style, imagery, description and emotional appeal. Feature writing gives depth to facts and records human drama.

For example, a straight news story about a tank exercise could be dull. However, it might be more interesting if written as a news feature, with the story seen through the eyes of the corporal driving one of the tanks. Use feature writing techniques to show what the corporal sees, smells, hears and feels. But don’t forget to include the news side of the story – the “who,” “what,” “when,” “where” and “why” of the exercise.

The content of a news feature includes both the facts and details of the news peg and the interesting context surrounding it. The major questions must be answered, with enough details to give readers satisfaction.

If a story receives news feature treatment, the writer must develop the story. A writer covering a fire might opt to interview firemen and, using feature writing techniques, show what it was like to fight the fire.

Hard news and news features do share some similarities. Both are timely and must be published within a short time of the event. And, both must answer the five W’s as fully as possible.
Finding focus

Once you’ve identified a story idea, you must examine it in order to develop a focus. We’ve already discussed the power of focus earlier in the course, but today we’re going to take a deeper look into developing a focus specifically for a news feature.

When it comes to news features, however, the starting point is the news peg.

Example:

*A post blood drive is scheduled for Monday*

Some experts encourage writers to find an approach, or angle, that works naturally.

Examples:

(Cause/effect) -- *Describe how the donated blood helps people*

(Chronological) -- *Follow the blood from vein to vein*

(Profile) -- *Story about a person who donates every month/story about a person who needed a blood transfusion*

The best practice in developing a focus is to boil down the essence of the story to one sentence that sums up what the story is about. Ask yourself, “What’s the point?” “Why is the story worth doing?” and “So what?”
Gathering information

You’ll have to do some general research first, so you’ll know where to begin. Some sources of information are data bases, historians, Web sites, reference books, past articles and subject-matter experts.

If you are writing an article about an upcoming blood drive, you might visit the American Red Cross Web site or read past articles about the same subject.

Some of the best material for your feature will come from face-to-face interviews with experts on the topic. Interviews not only provide additional information and insight, they also give you the quotations and anecdotes you need to bring a dull story to life.

You should follow a few basic interviewing protocols:

- When you schedule interviews, tell the interviewees what the story is about and give them an estimate of how long the interview will last.
- Prepare a list of questions in advance. Design the questions so they will encourage the interviewees to open up and extend the discussion.
- If you plan to use a tape recorder, ask the subjects for permission first.
- Be courteous and professional at all times.
Story structure

The basic parts of a news feature include the lead, nutgraph, body and conclusion. News feature leads revolve around the news peg. At least one of the W’s is typically reflected within the lead, which can be multiple sentences or even paragraphs. The five W’s and H don’t have to be at the beginning, but the important W’s and H must be logically answered somewhere in the story – usually near the news peg.

You may use any of the types of leads included in the course instruction. Choose the type that sets the right tone for your news feature. Summary feature leads are the easiest to write and are often used for news features.

The lead should grab the reader’s attention and reflect the focus of the story. The lead should transition into the nutgraph.

The nutgraph, which is the paragraph that expresses the focus of the story, should be simple and direct.

The body of the story should follow one of the organizational patterns introduced in the course. Ultimately, if each paragraph flows into the next logically and all the readers’ questions are answered, then the story is successfully organized.

The body should continue to reflect the focus of the story. Blend in the facts with descriptive writing and sprinkle in liberal doses of attribution in the form of paraphrases and direct quotes.

Feature writing adheres to the same ABCs of journalism presented in news writing. You must ensure that all of the information is accurate, brief and clear.

The conclusion should complement, not compete with, the lead. It should present or reinforce the theme or point of the story.

You may use any of the types of conclusions included in the course instruction. Choose the type that reflects the tone of your news feature.

Smoothly transitioning from the body to the conclusion tends to be a challenging part of the writing process. It may take a few revisions to make this part of the story as seamless as possible.
Editing effectively

If you are writing an article about an upcoming blood drive, you might visit the American Red Cross website or read past articles about the same subject.

After you gain more experience and confidence in your copy-editing ability, you will probably streamline the way you copy-edit. Until then, however, you should read through your work at least three times to eliminate errors.

This three-step copy-editing method was introduced to you in the beginning of the course.

1. Read first just for the tone of the story. See if it is a good piece of writing: do not try to catch or correct errors; this will distract you from reading for tone. You are looking for omissions and problems with the flow, organization and clarity of the lead, nutgraph, body and conclusion.

2. Second, read for errors. Look for all the mechanics. It may help to break this step into two or more readings so each time you look for specific errors. The mind tends to remember the last kind of error caught and can skip over a different type.

3. The third reading is for polish. This is where you look at the phrasing, descriptions, narrations and paraphrases and try to make them as well-written as possible.

As a new writer, it may also help to identify errors by:

- Reading your story aloud to catch typos, cumbersome phrases and poor grammar. You may hear problems your eyes didn’t catch.
- Cutting out all extraneous words, unnecessary quotes and repetitive transitions.
- Checking accuracy. Go back and check names, titles and quotes. Make sure you have the right person’s name attached to the quotes you have used. Check for typos and spelling errors.

Most of you will be writing for a weekly, monthly or quarterly publication. So, bringing the human element into your hard news stories will draw readers to your story.
Conclusion

The news feature provides a format to give your readers news, but in a more humanized way. Throughout your career you will write countless news features to communicate stories of hope, challenge, success, grief and happiness. The success of these features depends on a writer's ability to identify relevant topics, gather information and tell a thorough, interesting story to entertain or inform readers. Now, that's where you come in. Take what you've learned in this lesson and apply it to not only to current assignments, but to all the other features that will carry your name in the future.
References


Patterson, B. (1986). Write to be read: A practical guide to feature writing. Iowa State Press


Feature writing handbook (2008)