WRITING THE ADVANCED TEXT STORY

Chapter 6
“All the News: Writing and Reporting for Convergent Media”
Multimedia Reporting Course
THE ROLE OF FEATURE STORIES

- “Hard news” stories convey information about important and interesting events.
- People get most of their news from these types of stories.
- But many stories, especially those that do not concern a specific event or pronouncement, are better written as feature stories.
- “Soft news” or feature stories are usually more interesting or unusual than important.
- When the focus of a story is the how or why and not the what, then a feature approach is often used.
- Feature stories do not follow the rigid inverted pyramid format.
- Instead features can give writers a chance to showcase their creative talents to help lure readers into stories they might otherwise pass by.
TYPES OF FEATURE STORIES

- Profiles or personality features—describe interesting people
- Human interest—people overcoming obstacles
- Trend and Lifestyle—what’s hot/what’s not, what’s in/what’s out
- Occupation or hobby features—interesting, unusual jobs, hobbies, skills
- Explanatory features—often sidebar stories that provide more detailed explanations of an organization, activity, trend or person in the news
- Adventure features—describe unusual and exciting experiences
- How-to-Do-It features—tell readers how to perform some task
- Seasonal features—tie in with holidays and seasons
- Historical features—often commemorate anniversaries of important events
PLANNING & WRITING FEATURES

- A feature writer needs to take as much time as possible to gather information, including the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and textures that will help take readers on a journey.
- Once finished with research and interviews, the feature writer needs to develop a clear theme for the story.
- In a sentence or two, be able to answer this question: What is this story all about? (motorcycle example, p. 96)
- Consider length- some features are pretty short, just 200 words.
- These “brite” or “bright” stories regularly appear in newspapers and online news feature sections.
- They give readers a chance to sit back and have a chuckle, no matter how sad or depressing the rest of the day’s news is.
- Most feature stories, however, run much longer, 1,000-plus words.
- They may take 200 words just to get the story started.
FEATURE LEADS (AKA SOFT OR ALTERNATIVE LEADS)

- Anecdote
- Description
- Scene setting
- Quotation
- Question
- Suspenseful leads
- Ironic leads
- Direct-address
- Words used in unusual ways
- Multiparagraph

- Shockers—lead with a twist
- “Buried” or “Delayed” leads—these typically begin with an interesting example or anecdote that set a story’s theme, then a “nut graph”—perhaps the third or fourth graf- summarizes the story and provides a transition to the body
THE BODY OF THE FEATURE STORY

THE “WALL STREET JOURNAL FORMULA” (MOST USED: P. 110-2)

- This format/formula is also known as the focus style
- Story typically opens with a specific example presented in an anecdotal, descriptive or narrative lead
- A nut graf relates that example to a more general point and explains what the story is about
- The body of the story provides support for the general points (quotes, facts, developments, etc.)
- Story typically ends with another anecdote or description- often featuring the person or people featured in the lead- or speculates on a future development related to the lead
- See “Star Trek: Enterprise” example, pages 110-112
THE PERSONALITY PROFILE

- Used to present an overview of a person so that readers feel like they have had a glimpse into his or her life
- Such profiles can be challenging because people tend to be complicated or full of contradictions, and most provide elements of past, present, future
- Research - a writer needs to find out as much as possible about a person before interviewing him or her
- Should talk to subject’s friends, colleagues, enemies (and be able to quote them) to get a true picture of the person
- But don’t write a biography, trying to cover every aspect of person’s life
- Instead, look for the facet of a person that readers would most likely identify with or care about
- Helps to develop a theme statement about the person- in a nutshell, is her or she an overachiever, a dependable friend, a diehard activist, a paradox or something else?
- This theme will help the writer determine what to use/what to leave out
- Examine profile story structure model on pages 115-118
PROFILE STRUCTURE FOR BEGINNERS

- Article opens with an anecdotal lead capturing the distinguishing theme of the subject of the profile
- The justification section provides three quick points to suggest that the person is worth knowing more about, beginning or ending with a nut graph that states the theme
- The amplification section describes the person’s achievements
- The flashback section turns to the person’s roots and recounts significant life events that led to his or her current status
- The flash forward section looks ahead and give readers some insights into what the person is likely to do or move on to next
- A closing anecdote or strong quote reinforces the central theme and provides a sense of continuity
THE HUMAN INTEREST STORY

- A true human interest story recounts how one or more people come to terms with a situation—either good or bad—outside their control.
- The human interest story looks at things from a human perspective.
- A human interest story might focus on someone who has won the lottery, a group of hikers stranded by an avalanche, a kidnap victim, someone dealing with a severe disability or other obstacle that most of us do not have.
- Look at the “legendary” Reader’s Digest “Drama in Real Life” article format (p. 118) “to help the writer craft a gripping story.”
- Do you know any people or have seen anyone around campus/work/neighborhood who could make a good subject for a human interest story?
TRANSITIONAL WORDS AND SENTENCES

- Features are meant to be read from start to finish
- Look for ways to link ideas from paragraph to paragraph in a smooth, flowing and logical way
- Think of the story as a train— the engine is the lead, and each car that follows is a paragraph. The couplings that hold the paragraphs together are transitions
- Transition words can help readers move from one idea to the next: “meantime,” “also,” “instead,” etc.
- Transitional sentences link paragraphs that contain diverse ideas
- The transition sentences, like lead sentences, should do more than report that another idea was “introduced” or “discussed” (“label” leads)
- They should instead present some interesting details about the new topic so readers will want to finish the story
- A good transitional sentence often serves the same purposes as a lead, summarizing the topic it introduces and revealing what was said or done about it
While hard news stories often fade out, per inverted pyramid style, feature stories need to go out with a bang.

Feature story endings serve both to wrap up the story and to provide a sense of completeness.

A good ending reflects the tone of a story and seems exactly right for it.

Types of feature endings:

- **Summary**: summarize main point of story, often using words of the subject (quote)
- **Circle**: writer circles back to the lead and neatly close the story
- **Surprise**: gives readers a jolt but at the same time must be right for the story - must be short, crisp and logically follow what’s come before.