Professional Feature Writing

Sixth Edition



ROUTLEDGE COMMUNICATION SERIES

Bruce Garrison

ROUTLEDGE

Professional Feature Writing

Professional Feature Writing provides an essential introduction to the basics of news media feature writing and establishes a solid foundation for students and writers making feature writing as their careers.

This sixth edition offers a thorough and up-to-date look at newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and online publications, with emphasis on daily newspapers, consumer magazines, and online news. Special attention is paid to writing skills, feature story types, and the collegiate and professional writing life, and the text is filled with practical guidance for writing a wide variety of features, drawing on insights from both junior and experienced writers, editors, and publishers. Alongside a solid tour of forms and approaches to feature writing, the author includes lists of tips, observations, guidelines, sources, and story ideas.

New to this edition are:

- Three chapters covering interviewing and observation in features, social media in feature writing, and writing social trends features;
- Updated international examples of feature writing, integrated throughout the text;
- Additional and expanded discussion about writing features for online publications and the uses of social media in gathering information and reporting;
- Increased attention to multimedia and the impact of new technologies on the industry.

Building on introductory writing and reporting skills, this text is appropriate for upper-division journalism students learning feature writing and advanced writing topics. It will also serve as a valuable resource for freelance writers.

Bruce Garrison is a professor in the Journalism and Media Management Department, School of Communication, University of Miami. He was awarded a Fulbright grant for China and lectured at Shanghai International Studies University and several other Chinese universities. Garrison is the author of books and journal articles about the uses of new technologies in newsrooms and by the public, reporting, writing, sports journalism, and journalism in Latin America.

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Professional Feature Writing, 6th Edition
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Sixth Edition

Bruce Garrison

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About the Author

Bruce Garrison is a professor in the Journalism and Media Management Department of the School of Communication at the University of Miami, Coral Gables, FL. He teaches graduate- and undergraduate-level journalism and mass communication courses. Among them are a class focusing on feature writing, another about travel writing, and a third focused on covering entertainment and the arts. He is a long-time resident of South Florida.

Garrison has worked as a news reporter, sportswriter, feature writer, or copy editor for the *Lexington Herald*, *Hattiesburg* (MS) *American*, *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, *Dallas Morning News*, *Milwaukee Journal*, *The Patriot Ledger* of Quincy, MA, *The Miami News*, and *The Miami Herald*. He has supervised and edited special feature sections and projects for the daily *Key West Citizen,* which became the *Keys Citizen* in 2022.

He has written features for newspaper industry magazines and newsletters, such as *Editor & Publisher*, *Coach's Corner*, *Publisher's Auxiliary*, and several annual publications of the Associated Press Managing Editors.

He is a U.S. Fulbright Scholar (Shanghai, 2004–2005) and he served as a Research Fellow at Shanghai International Studies University (2012). He has also conducted writing workshops in England, India, China, and Sri Lanka.

He supervises a travel writing and feature writing project about the American national parks, Our National Parks, found online at http://ournationalparks.us. The site, created in 2002, contains almost 1,000 student story and photo packages about the major parks across the United States. His travel writing class has its own Web site, The South Florida Travel Writers Group, found at https://students.com.miami.edu/travelwriting/. And some of the work of his arts reporting and reviewing class can be found at https://students.com.miami.edu/reviewing/.

He has traveled with students for study-abroad feature writing classes in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Beijing, Xian, Chengdu, and Lijiang in the People's Republic of China, and Bangkok in nearby Thailand. He has also worked with his study-abroad students in Germany and the Czech Republic. He taught courses in feature writing and reviewing the arts for Semester at Sea and the University of Pittsburgh in 2004.

Garrison is the author or co-author of several other books about journalism and mass communication, including a co-authored book with the late Dr. Michael B. Salwen and UM colleague Dr. Paul Driscoll, *Online News and the Public* (2005). He

has also written *Computer-Assisted Reporting* (2nd ed., 1998), *Successful Strategies for Computer-Assisted Reporting* (1996), *Sports Reporting* (1993, 2nd ed.), *Professional News Reporting* (1992), *Advanced Reporting: Skills for the Professional* (1992), *Professional News Writing* (1990), and, co-authored with Michael B. Salwen, *Latin American Journalism* (1991).

Acknowledgments

As with the first five editions, I received valuable help to finish this project. Gratitude is owed to many people who contributed, and I want to mention a few of them in this space. I sometimes neglect mentioning it to them, but I offer my sincerest thanks to my students, who always seem willing to lend a hand. They inspire me to keep this book fresh and interesting.

Furthermore, my appreciation is offered to these individuals who contributed to this sixth edition:

- Prof. Randy Stano, magazine and publication design professor of professional practice in the School of Communication at UM, for his thoughts about student publications on college and university campuses.
- Prof. Erin Brown, Web design and online news senior lecturer in the School of Communication at UM, for her thoughts about the uses of social media by professional journalists.
- Dr. Yanfang Wu, assistant professor in the School of Communication at UM, for sharing some of her recent observations and research about social media use by journalists.
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I continue to feel much gratitude for those who contributed in different ways to the fifth edition and other editions. It is difficult to believe, but this book began as an idea in 1987 or so, almost four decades ago, with the first edition published by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates in New Jersey in 1989.

Finally, I offer gratitude to my yellow lab Max and rescue cat Mimi for taking long naps during the day to give me the needed time to work on this edition.

Bruce Garrison
Palmetto Bay, Florida

Preface

Professional Feature Writing discusses feature writing and storytelling for news media. Features are written today for online publications such as news websites and for more traditional print content. The key is storytelling. Features are a large part of the content people seek in their newspapers, magazines, online news sites, and newsletters, and this book tries to guide motivated writers down the right path to identifying a good story and the best ways to tell it.

The content of this book emphasizes writing values that will strengthen the reader's journalistic practices. It is aimed at students with some, but not much, writing experience. The purpose of the sixth edition is the same as that of the first five editions: to give advanced journalism students (primarily juniors, seniors, and master's students) and young professionals a thorough look at feature writing for publication. To fully appreciate this new edition's contents, student readers would benefit from an introduction to news writing course and a reporting course or a combination course.

Journalism students should find it filled with good advice for storytelling techniques and for writing different types of feature stories. The book offers lists of tips and observations from professionals. Similarly, lists of useful categories of sources and story ideas are offered. The expanding online world, particularly Web news and social media, is integrated into the book to expand on the discussion of online research and reference tools.

To accomplish these goals, the book utilizes many sources of information. It is a collection of a wide variety of perspectives and experiences of the author and other experienced writers, editors, publishers, and professors. This volume offers a broad-ranging tour of the different forms and approaches to feature writing.

There are several points to note about this new edition. First, the book continues to be geared toward advanced student writers and beginning professionals. There are no exercises or other classroom activities. Students are expected to practice their feature writing and reporting in the communities around them while working on fresh class assignments that can lead to publication in their campus news media or elsewhere. Second, this book emphasizes content for daily newspapers, consumer magazines, and online news sites, with some discussion of writing for newsletters as well.

This newest version of *Professional Feature Writing* emphasizes three primary aspects of feature writing: introduction and writing basics, the major feature story

types, and becoming a professional writer. In each chapter, readers learn from the narrative, from the advice of professionals, and from numerous examples.

There are discussions of examples from leading feature writers and news organizations that illustrate how-to points that are made. Although many of the examples in this edition are new, some of the very best examples written by award-winning journalists from earlier editions have been retained.

Useful changes and improvements in this edition include:

- New U.S. and international media examples. These examples are drawn from some of the best professional writers and from leading news organizations as well as some of the fresh faces just getting their careers started. This edition includes recent international English-language examples.
- Additional expanded discussion about writing features for online publications.
- New content to discuss interviewing for feature writers. This content is blended with observational skills in a new chapter.
- New content focusing on the growing role of social media in feature writing. This includes finding story ideas, identifying sources, and building writer brands.
- New content about writing social trend features. This is a fast-growing area for feature writers who are expected to identify trends in their communities.
- More content about the primary ways in which new technologies and related tools impact feature writing. While online research has its limitations and risks, it can be fast and extraordinarily helpful if wisely executed. This edition addresses the uses of smartphone tools/apps in newsgathering, numerous tools for communicating with sources and conducting research for features, and, again, applications of social media in information gathering and in writer branding.



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Part I

The Basics



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Chapter 1

Feature Writing Today

Danielle McNally is typical of feature writers and editors working for magazines these days. She graduated from the University of Miami with a journalism degree and looked for a job in the magazine industry. McNally, originally from St. Petersburg, Fla., headed for New York City, the center of magazine publishing in the United States, just weeks after she finished school. Armed with an internship at a national magazine and considerable experience as the founding editor of *Distraction*, her award-winning undergraduate campus magazine at the University of Miami, she had high hopes to find work and begin her climb up the editorial ladder to write for, and eventually edit, a national magazine.

Now she is the executive editor of *Marie Claire* and oversees features across all the magazine's platforms. In addition to editing the magazine, she contributes to its print, digital, video, and marketing strategy. McNally has held various leadership roles along the way, including director of features and special projects and deputy editor. Prior to joining *Marie Claire*, McNally was a senior editor at *Cosmopolitan*, handling the brand's health, fitness, and nutrition coverage, in addition to editing news, political, and social justice features. She has held positions at *Details* and *Shape* and was on staff at *Food Network Magazine* during its launch in 2008. It was the 10th largest magazine brand in the U.S. in 2021. McNally has edited work that has been nominated for a National Magazine Award in personal service four times, with the package "Invasion of Privacy" winning the award in 2021 (McNally, 2022).

How did she get so far in her career? She says her big step in college was an internship between her junior and senior years at a New York magazine. She explained:

> In the summer of 2007, I was chosen as the American Society of Magazine Editors (ASME) intern at *Food & Wine*. The experience I garnered from this internship was invaluable. It gave me a first-person look at the dynamism that occurs as a major national magazine comes together. I experienced an energy and a workstyle and schedule that I had not yet encountered at my previous internships with regional magazines in Miami or in my schoolwork. I was able to partake in all aspects of magazine production from the very initial stages of research to conceptualizing the design and photography elements to fact-checking and copy-editing. My personal responsibilities consisted mostly of assisted and conducting research for my supervising editor, but I was also able to write my own pieces for

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> the magazine's website. These included a Q&A interview with a well-known New York sommelier, a sidebar on organic charitable initiatives, and a blog about the premier of food-themed movie, 'No Reservations'.
>
> (Personal communication to author, September 3, 2008)

After finishing her internship, she returned to her senior year and became the moving force toward the creation of a new campus magazine hosted by her school's journalism program. "I took the managerial aspects of producing a magazine that I learned at *Food & Wine* (scheduling, organization, interaction between departments) and brought that back with me to the University of Miami and my new endeavor, *Distraction*," McNally explained.

> Working on *Distraction* was the best learning experience I had in college. I had never been an editor. Although I had worked with my peers on group projects and stories with multiple writers, I had never had to be in charge of such a large group or to make so many varied, important decisions. Managing my peers was both challenging and educational. Suddenly I had to consider not just my own writer's perspective on a story, but also the personality and focus of the magazine and its audience. I had to consider style, fit, and design when editing a story. As feature writers, we often only think about how we believe the story should be told. We focus only on the words. But as an editor, I had to consider both the writer's point of view and the magazine's, which in turn made me a much better writer. As writers, especially when pitching ideas to editors, we should consider all the aspects of the story's final product.
>
> For features, writers should submit their own suggestions for sidebars, heads and decks, captions for photos and ways to package the story. I also learned how important it was for a writer to pay attention to the parameters the editor has given. Numerous times while editing *Distraction* I received stories more than three times the assigned word length or in a voice completely opposite of what my staff and I had envisioned when planning the story. This was extremely frustrating. However, I still had to cut and edit my peers' stories. After the magazine came out, some writers were upset at the changes made to the stories they had written. This was one of the more difficult parts of editing *Distraction*. However, by the second issue, I used this to better explain to writers what was expected. Through all the editing I did, it actually helped me become a much better writer.

McNally and her staff wrote and produced two issues of the new magazine before school ended that year. McNally was then quite lucky to find work in the magazine industry in Manhattan so quickly after graduation. But her preparation as a student made a big difference and got editors to notice her.

> I started my job hunt during the spring semester of my senior year, sending cover letters to contacts I had made during my time in New York previously and going on informational interviews. In an effort to get my foot in the door at as many magazines as possible, I spent one afternoon at Barnes & Noble going through

the masthead of every magazine that interested me. I took down the name of the executive editor (or a comparable position) and sent each of those people a copy of my cover letter, resume, *Distraction*, and a handful of other clips. While this did help me secure more interviews (and I would suggest this to other job-hunters), I actually got my job with a little bit of luck.

Upon arriving in New York, I attended a reunion for ASME alums. There my internship coordinator introduced me to an alumna from a few years previous, Tracy Saelinger, who was working on the launch of a new food magazine, *Food Network Magazine*. She felt I would be a good fit for the publication because of my experience at *Food & Wine*. The next day I sent my resume to Tracy, and she called me for an interview later that week. A few days after that, the editor-in-chief, Maile Carpenter, called to offer me the job. Using my network and connections, as well as previous experience in the specific field and genre I wanted to enter, combined to land me the job. I really enjoyed my time at *Food Network Magazine*. Since it is a launch, the staff is very small (only eight people on the edit side, including interns), and I have been given quite a bit of responsibility. I had a lot of administrative duties as the assistant to the editor-in-chief. But I am also lucky enough to have my own stories to write and pages to edit; I work on production and participate in tons of research and creative content development. I edited the basic Front of Book pages, including the masthead and star index. But I also wrote short newsy pieces and market descriptions for the holiday gift guide. My written involvement has increased with the second issue, and they selected several of the ideas I pitched for inclusion in future issues. I think one of the great things about this job was that it gives me the opportunity to move into larger responsibilities more quickly than I would be allowed at an established magazine with a fuller staff.

She was on staff for two months before it published the first issue. "*Food Network Magazine* is a joint venture between Hearst Publications and the Food Network. I feel like this project was meant for me," she explained. "My experience as an intern at *Food & Wine*, then launching *Distraction*, combined to prepare me for this exact magazine! *Distraction* was certainly a huge help in securing this job. Since it is a launch, the staff is very small (only eight people on the editorial side, including interns), and I was given quite a bit of responsibility. In addition to acting as the assistant to the editor-in-chief, I had my own stories to write, pages to edit, work on production, and participate in tons of research and creative content development."

Like McNally or any other professional feature writer or magazine staff member, it will take large amounts of time and considerable effort to succeed. You have to ask yourself some tough questions about your abilities. For example, could you write a definitive discussion of cloning procedures and related ethical issues for *U.S. News & World Report*? Or could you write a profile of the hottest new East Coast political leader for *The New Yorker* or *The New Republic*? Or a new film star for *People*? Can you prepare a compelling article about toddlers suffering from COVID-19 for *Parenting*? Or could you write a highly descriptive and entertaining piece about the nightlife or long weekends on South Beach in Miami Beach for *Ocean Drive*? Could you write a guide to the best Colorado mountain hiking trails for *Condé Nast*

Traveler or a human-interest story about traveling with grandchildren in AARP's *Modern Maturity*? Could you write a travel service feature focusing on finding bargain holiday season airfares in the *Chicago Tribune* Sunday edition?

Is this over your head? Probably. For now, perhaps.

Give yourself time. Find your own level. Maybe you could write a short review of the newest Scarlett Johansson or Chris Pratt movie in your campus newspaper or even your local newspaper's weekend or entertainment sections. Maybe you could write a humorous column for your campus newspaper or a campus-based Web site, a social media page, or perhaps you could prepare a holiday story about foreign students at your school who are experiencing their first Thanksgiving or taking their first final exams. Maybe you can handle a personality sketch of a nearby high school athlete who recently set a school scoring record.

Do these seem to be more reachable goals for you? Possibly. But perhaps not yet. Start by writing about what you know. Feature writing includes all these possibilities, even those for the top national and international publications, and they are attainable with a lot of hard work and the development of your talents.

You may wish to become a feature writer. You like the idea of writing for mass media such as newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and online news publications. You may have an interest in writing features or perhaps someone once told you that you could write, saying that you might have what it takes to become a journalist or a novelist. If you want to be a successful professional feature writer, then you must be willing to sweat.

You must like people and be willing to spend time with them, too. You must be willing to live with frustration. You must make personal and professional sacrifices. You must be willing to work long hours. You must be willing to take little or no remuneration in the beginning. You must have a strong desire to publish your writing. If you are still with me after those admonitions, welcome to the world of feature writing. You might just have what it takes to be a staff or a freelance feature writer.

It is important to emphasize the difficulty of being a successful professional writer. Yet for those who do have the drive and talent to succeed, there can be significant personal and professional rewards. Your first byline will be highly satisfying. So will the second, or third, or 400th. The euphoria you feel from this accomplishment at any level, from student newspaper to major international magazine, is equaled by little else in professional writing. And beginners do have a chance at making it. With the right idea at the right time, you can become a published feature writer early in your career.

Professor Myrick Land (1993) wrote that success in writing requires intelligence, imagination, talent, and persistence. This volume gives you the basic tools for writing feature stories for newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and online news publications. What really motivates you to be a writer? If you can answer that question by the time you finish this book, you might have the foundation for becoming a successful professional feature writer.

You write because you want to pass along facts and other information to others. You write to share what you have learned. You write to tell stories. Readers learn from you. They are entertained. They are thrilled. They are saddened. They become informed. People react to what you have to say in print. At the same time, you have a

tremendous responsibility to be accurate, concise, timely, and responsible. You also must know how to express yourself. This basic communication skill is your starting point in feature writing for the news media. You must have the interest and you have to have writing ability. At some point in your life, you began to think of yourself as a writing-oriented person.

And you wound up with this book, opened to the first few pages of the first chapter, perhaps wondering if you can write features well enough to make a living (or well enough to pass a college feature writing class). But knowing you have basic writing interest and ability is not enough, according to Scott Meredith (1987), who managed a New York literary agency: "To have basic writing ability and no technical knowledge, and to try to earn a living as a writer, is equivalent to finding yourself suddenly endowed with a large amount of steel, lumber, and bricks and, without any knowledge of architecture or building, setting out to earn your living building and selling houses" (p. 3).

Defining a Feature

If you take the term literally, a *feature* is a special part of something. Feature articles are often special portions of the periodicals that publish them. They do take many different approaches and forms, of course. Most persons familiar with nonfiction writing for the news media think of the conventional straight news or hard news topics and approaches – police and courts, sports, local government, or business – written to give the who, what, when, where, why, and how. These stories emphasize the important persons, the activities, current events, local and regional orientation, explanation of importance, and nature of the event.

Feature stories go beyond this level to be special. Feature writers often employ some "license" or flexibility and emphasize the unconventional or the different. Feature writers look for a story about someone who is not necessarily a newsmaker. Instead, the story is about something or someone offbeat and entertaining.

Feature stories are emotional, and they involve readers. They demand reader reaction because these articles can be serious or light, timely or timeless, funny or sad, joyful or joyless. These stories tell us much about the human condition. All you must do is pick up a recent copy of your local newspaper or favorite magazine to see the variety of subjects and approaches that are a part of feature article writing.

One professional writer defines feature writing as *creative*, *subjective* article writing that is designed to *inform* and *entertain* readers. Daniel Williamson's (1975) interpretation emphasizes the four words italicized. These points help to show features are different from straight news or information writing.

First, features certainly contain more creative energy than routine nonfiction. Writers and editors take a bit more freedom in their writing style or approaches, selection of sources, and packaging of stories. Second, these articles are often less objective than conventional news writing, offering a particular point of view or the author's personal impressions, perceptions, and opinions (in addition to those of sources). Third, the stories remain informative even if they are more creative and personalized by the writer. The level of reader utility of a story often determines its success with readers. Fourth, the story must entertain the reader while accomplishing all three other goals. The article makes readers satisfied they chose to spend five minutes or even an hour reading the article instead of pursuing some other activity.

A feature is also less perishable than conventional nonfiction or news writing. Stories often are held for appropriate seasons or for slow news periods in newspapers. And simply because of their less frequent publication schedules, magazines often hold stories for considerable lengths of time prior to publication.

Other professionals compare feature writing to fiction, specifically short stories. The major difference, of course, is that feature writers deal with reality. However, some of the best feature writers incorporate the styles and techniques of fiction writers into their work. Benton Patterson (1986), who has written for newspapers and magazines across the United States, offered the following:

> A feature writer deliberately puts people (characters) into what he writes. He describes them and shows them (description) doing and saying (action, expressed through narrative and quotes) whatever it is that makes the characters worth writing – and reading – about. When he puts those elements into his piece, a writer is *ipso facto* featurizing his subject, handling his material and writing his piece as a feature (p. 21).

Patterson's (1986) three basic rules for features are straightforward. Put people into the story, tell a story and let the reader see and hear for him or herself.

Jon Kelly and Mariana Des Forges told an amusing but heart-warming story for the BBC News Web site about a woman who was close to her father growing up in the 1980s near Boston. She thought he was an outward, but straight-laced and rather prudish man. But when she was 8, she discovered his other side. They slowly tell the story about how she learned about her father's career as a writer, a best-selling sex writer. This is the beginning of their story about Sara Faith Alterman and her father, Ira:

> *Growing up near Boston, Massachusetts, during the 1980s, Sara always felt a special bond with her dad, Ira.*
>
> *"My father and I were very much alike," she says. "We even look a lot alike, which is funny to me now that a little girl could look like, you know, a 40-year-old Jewish man. We had the same facial features and the same hair and so I kind of wanted to emulate him."*
>
> *Ira would always be the person she would go to if she had a problem that needed solving. He passed on to Sara and her brother his love of language and wordplay – he'd worked as a newspaper journalist before going into marketing, and family road trips would be spent playing word games, or coming up with puns and rhymes.*
>
> *"I wanted to be like him in so many ways," she says. "So I absorbed a lot from those games we played in the car. I really found it fun to twist words and come up with new things – it felt like a weird dad-skill that a lot of my friends didn't have."*
>
> *Sara's parents were passionate about puzzles and organising scavenger hunts. What they didn't like was anything they felt might threaten their children's innocence – so all adult topics were completely taboo, especially sex … .*

After continuing to build the suspense about what he did, Kelly and Des Forges told readers about her unexpected discovery:

> *But one day, when she was eight, Sara made a discovery that challenged everything she thought she knew about him … .*
>
> (Kelly & Des Forges, 2021)

The writers described the books she found stored in a closet. And they had her father's name on the covers. As years passed and she grew up, the relationship changed. But the books were never discussed. She became an adult and married, but there was no discussion of the books and her father's work. Then one day he told her he wanted to begin writing his sex-oriented books again and wanted her help. She was shocked and declined to help him. As her father aged, he had become stricken with Alzheimer's Disease. He was 68 and she was 34. With the diagnosis, she understood his sudden openness about his work as a young writer. So, she helped him. Their account of Sara and Ira was poignant and meaningful and was an entertaining read for anyone interested in parent-child relationships with a rather unusual twist.

The Art and Craft of Feature Writing

About 110 years ago, University of Wisconsin journalism professor Willard Bleyer, one of the pioneers in journalism education, wrote that feature writing requires special writing ability. Some things, such as the fundamentals of sound feature writing, don't change much over time. Feature writing still requires mastery of writing tools and extraordinary writing skills. Bleyer (1913, p. 213) wrote:

> Feature stories requires (sic) some literary ability beyond that necessary for routine reporting. From the point of view of its composition the feature story is like a miniature short story. Therefore no definitive rules can be laid down for its treatment. There need be no summary of essential facts at the beginning as in the typical news story. Like the short fiction story, the feature story may begin in any way that will attract the reader's attention, and may be developed by conversation, by narration, or by description that suggests rather than portrays in detail. A good feature story frequently tells itself … .

Just about all feature stories have these elements in common and often in large quantity. Good features use people in the story, quoted often about what they do that is so interesting. Feature stories are not written like meeting minutes. Features are not dreary matter-of-fact research reports. They are not lifeless summaries of big events. They are often factual short stories written in active voice. They have a plot. There is

a story line. There are characters. There is a beginning, middle, and end. Many writers will say that feature articles fall somewhere between news writing and short story writing.

You will see the major types of feature articles used by magazines, newspapers, social media, online news sites, newsletters, and other publications later in this volume. You can focus on such story forms as color stories that emphasize descriptive writing, human interest stories, personality sketches and profiles, social trends, seasonal feature stories, entertainment features and critical feature writing, aftermath and follow-up feature stories, the feature series, travel article writing, personal experience stories, how-to-do-it stories, humor writing, and science and new technology features.

There is a discussion of the tools you need as a feature writer. You learn how to find a good feature idea and how to mold it into a story, how to research story ideas, how to write and edit feature stories, and how to successfully sell feature articles for publication. You also learn professional and ethical standards of professional feature writers. You see these types of stories applied in their major forms: weekly and daily newspapers and general and specialized magazines. The writing strategies and information-gathering approaches for feature writing are discussed in broad terms, but often with specific application to the print media.

Technology and Writing Outlets Are Changing

The technology used to produce feature content, most of it digital today, is changing. So is the way we distribute the content we produce. Today's feature writers develop their work in a multimedia environment. This means, simply, that their work is produced not for a single medium, such as a magazine or newspaper, but often for several media or platforms at the same time. Writers remain writers, but they must also master skills that permit them to prepare professional-level content for online distribution. Much online distribution today takes the form of video and audio as well as still images. And, today, many news organizations require their writers – both staff writers and freelance writers – to produce content for social media branding and partner news organizations such as television or radio stations in addition to Web sites.

This creates demand for new skills for writers. For you to be best prepared, you must be able to write well no matter the platform that will distribute your words, photographs, video, and audio. But you need to cultivate other skills as well. This means a good feature writer needs to be a strong editor, a good photographer, a skilled videographer, and an able digital audio editor. And, once this content is gathered, there are increasing demands for feature writers who can also produce the packages of multimedia content for distribution.

All this comes down to learning and developing a few different skill sets beyond just feature writing to become successful. The better you become at writing, of course, the better will experience a good start. But you also must grow in the other areas to take your own photographs as well as edit and select the best ones. And do the same thing for video and audio content. It does not hurt to know Web production skills either. And, it goes without saying, that the knowledge of how to use online resources on the Web or for social media sites has become increasingly valuable.

Most journalists have acquired portable digital tools to help them do their work. Some have the gear provided by their employers, but others must invest in it themselves. College students today commonly own laptops or tablets in addition to smartphones and can take photos and videos, record audio, and allow for digital notetaking. These tools help you gather information and, perhaps, even distribute it online. They are an excellent beginning for mastery of the multimedia world and to begin the mobile journalist's workstyle. The bottom line? You must grow as the tools of our profession evolve and new ones are introduced. We must learn to use today's hardware and software in addition to mastering the art of writing.

Feature Writing Opportunities

There are new writing opportunities in the 2020s. For example, the online news and electronic publications industry has evolved rapidly. Writing positions have opened at online newspapers, print and digital magazines, social media, print and digital newsletters, and online broadcast outlets. In this digital age, a growing number of diverse news organizations require staff and freelance writers who can produce feature content involving social media, not just print or Web news content. News organizations that have taken their publications to the Internet also offer original content on those sites, creating a need for writers and editors.

Newspapers have a significant presence and role on the Web as their print presence wanes. The leading U.S. online newspapers today are *Wall Street Journal, The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. Other leading news Web sites online are published in Tampa-St. Petersburg, Chicago, Minneapolis, San Francisco, Boston and in major cities around the world such as London, Paris, Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Singapore (Agility PR Solutions, 2021).

Despite their increased visibility and reader demand on the Web, newspapers are experiencing hard economic times. Newspaper advertising is down with advertisers turning instead to online news media and social media. Circulation is dropping in many markets, yet the population continues to grow. This means fewer people are reading newspapers, preferring to get their information from online news Web sites and social media. Staff are being reduced. Some experts have long ago labeled newspapers as "irrelevant" (Glaberson, 1993, p. D7). Other authorities think that is an overstatement. But the point is well taken: The future is uncertain. News companies are unsure of content and for future generations.

Some news and information and telecommunications companies that publish newspapers and other news products are exploring new ways to use computers, telecommunications, social media, and other common consumer technology to deliver news to customers. This not only means personal computers, smartphones, tablets, and more. The implications for all writers, not just feature writers, seem to be massive.

There are many more magazines than daily and weekly newspapers. The fastest-growing magazine subject category is business and finance (17% audience growth from 2019 to 2020), followed by epicurean, travel, women, general editorial, outdoor recreation, women's fashion, health, men, and sports. While these numbers are pre-COVID pandemic, they reveal the most popular reader interest areas entering 2022 (Magazine Publishers of America, 2021).

The Magazine Publishers of America, the leading trade organization among U.S. magazine publishers, is optimistic about the industry's resilience in 2022, writing in a 2021 annual report: "Overall audience across print, digital, and video rose during the COVID-19 pandemic – to 1.56 billion readers – and enthusiasm for the trusted, curated content that magazine media delivers remained strong, with the top three magazine publishers reaching more women than the top four technology platforms. Ninety percent of Americans under 25 read print and digital versions of magazines – and 63% of millennials (Americans aged 25 to 40) say that, even in the digital age, they love the touch and feel of a printed magazine. Magazine media's social media footprint grew to nearly 700 million 'page likers' and followers on Facebook and Instagram, and Instagram followers increased by 16 percent year over year." (Magazine Publishers of America, 2021).

Although many magazines are dependent upon subscriptions for sales, some sell more single-copy issues than subscription issues. The biggest magazines continue to be big. Among the top U.S. magazine brands are American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) (37 million, average monthly audience), *People* (32 million), *Better Homes & Gardens* (29 million), *National Geographic* (28 million), *Sports Illustrated* (16 million), *Reader's Digest* (16 million), *Good Housekeeping* (16 million), *Time* (15 million), *Southern Living* (15 million), and *Food Network Magazine* (13 million) (Magazine Publishers of America, 2021).

However, there are thousands of smaller monthly, bimonthly, and quarterly publications. And some of these national or regional magazines are comparatively small but are growing very fast. They are smaller because they reach more specialized audiences, but they offer marvelous opportunities for serious feature writers.

Newsletter Opportunities

A smart feature writer seeking freelance markets will not overlook commercial- and organization-based newsletter journalism. There are small organization newsletters, large public subscription-based newsletters, and lots in between. Many are highly specialized in their content, designed for a unique group of readers. Careers are developing in this established and growing field. Newsletters are not just small "mom and pop"-type editorial operations or published by groups for their members. Commercial business-to-business newsletters have become a major industry with thousands of editions each business day, week, month, or quarter. It may be impossible to estimate the number of newsletters regularly published in print and online in the United States.

Many newsletters today are published online only and not printed. Perhaps both formats are used for some, but many have gone online in one or more formats. Some use a Web site page or pages approach. Some are published on pages housed on a social media site. Others use e-mail to send a formatted text within the e-mail itself. And others produce the newsletter as it might be printed and then create a pdf file to attach to e-mail to readers. These non-print approaches, of course, get the content to readers much more quickly.

With so many new publications beginning each month and others closing because funding becomes difficult to find or interests evolve, the numbers are difficult to estimate. But newsletters are a diverse and far-ranging publishing industry that offer

countless opportunities for feature writers. Newsletters is a term "used to describe publications of all kinds, ranging from scientific journals to occasional bulletins that carry commercial product notices," wrote Amy Darga (2003, p. vii), editor of the authoritative *Newsletters in Print* directory. "Conversely, publications that are arguably newsletters in format and content call themselves 'magazines,' 'newspapers,' or 'journals.'" For the most part, professional-caliber newsletters are serial in nature, have national or broad regional interest, have specialized content, and have a variety of formats and publishing styles (including today, of course, both print and digital forms).

Many newsletters that we may be most familiar with are organizational and not widely circulated. Others are distributed to the public or to private groups free or for sale, but their circulation numbers or simple existence are not regulated or monitored by any national organizations. It is safe to say, however, that there are thousands of such periodicals, and the figure is growing with the recent development of inexpensive production and printing technology. Some are large and some are small. These are excellent publications for beginners seeking to gain writing experience.

Social Media and Other Feature Writing Opportunities

Social media today have enormous audiences, even if you remove what are called fake accounts. The numbers are staggering, and the point is clear: Social media can reach millions of people both rapidly and frequently. Some of the most widely used social media have international audiences in excess of 100 million users. These include Facebook, TikTok, WeChat, Instagram, Twitter, the Chinese Weibo, and LinkedIn (Social media, 2022). And, among social media, TikTok, Telegram Messenger (a cross-platform, cloud-based instant messaging service), and Reddit have grown the fastest since 2020.

The idea that feature writers need to be social media savvy is not new nor original. But it is an important one. Our use of social media as professional feature writers will be discussed a few chapters later in, but it is important to note the growth of social media here and that their role for writers is ever-changing. We use them for research for information and to find sources, for fast wide distribution of our work, and for branding ourselves as writers as well as the branding of the organizations we represent.

Another type of feature writing form, blogging, is found on the Web. Much older in development than social media, blogs have continued their popularity for writers during the past decade. They are increasingly used by staff and freelance writers as outlets for their work. Blogs are Web sites offering personal logs and journal-style content. Some blogs are single-authored and some are collaborations of groups of interested contributors. These sites have attracted quite a following. They are easy to access and use as publishing bases. Most sites do not require fees. And some sites, such as WordPress, can provide site space or permit software to be downloaded for private servers. Blog readers find them appealing because the content changes every day. This highly personal approach to journalism has been used in independent, nonbranded online news sites and has become a feature of some more conventional online news sites as well. The ease of using the software required to create blogs has led to their worldwide growth in popularity (Walker, 2001; Higgins, 2000).

It seems to go without saying, but we will say it anyway: Newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and online news sites today depend on technology. Because of computers, smartphones, and other modern tech, you can gather information in ways impossible for a generation before you. You can work on computer systems that make the preparation of manuscripts much easier than ever before. Publications are sophisticated in production techniques. This means feature writers on deadline can produce stories faster and closer to printing deadlines and supplement the usual news coverage of an event, whether it be for a Web site, daily newspaper, a daily e-mail newsletter, or a weekly newsmagazine.

Newspaper and magazine group ownership trends have changed the nature of the business. The largest newspaper groups have purchased many major and medium-sized dailies. And many of those businesses have been bought by major financial investors. Other companies have gathered up available small dailies and weeklies. Magazines have experienced the same phenomenon, with many ownership changes in recent decades. Companies have bought up independently owned magazines to form new or larger groups. The effect has been less independent management of publications. At times, staff positions have been eliminated to create more profitable operating costs. It has meant a harder time making a living for feature writers in some markets and some specializations. It has also meant greater resources and new ideas. It has meant some publications near failure got a second chance, which has helped writers.

Newspapers are in the middle of significant change. Print editions are disappearing in favor of online issues. Newspapers are using feature material in larger quantities. Because of this, they seek better quality from writers to keep the high demand for their editions. Reacting to television and other electronic media vying for growing entertainment and leisure time of Americans, newspapers are offering material once found only in magazines such as longer in-depth profiles and analyses. This phenomenon is known as the "magazining of newspapers" (Rivers, 1992, p. 13). Some newspaper feature sections have shown interest in shorter, tightly written pieces with the same "television story" flare of *USA Today*.

Television, film, and other influences changed newspapers and magazines in the 1960s and 1970s. Newspapers began to develop regional, or zoned, editions and to look at other dissemination techniques. General interest consumer magazines closed when operations became more costly than circulation and advertising revenues could cover. To segment the general audience, more specialized magazines evolved in the 1960s and 1970s to replace general interest publications. Suddenly, readers interested in health and medicine did not have to depend on newsmagazines or the coffee-table magazines of another era. They, instead, subscribe to *Prevention*, *Vibrant Life, Vim & Vigor*, or other similar magazines. Magazines, like newspapers, have changed as well in recent decades.

The Web has similarly changed print publications that offer feature content. In some cases, there have been very difficult times, forcing basic survival decisions by editors and publishers and the problems are not always caused by their choice of content. Magazines such as *Family Circle, National Geographic Traveler, Popular Science*, *American Girl*, *Glamour*, *Money*, and *ESPN The Magazine* were forced to close in the harsh realities of advertising slumps, changing readership, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

It has been a case of "too many titles chasing too few ad pages," according to magazine industry consultant George Simpson (Wolk, 1991, p. 2G). Some magazines have survived on sound fiscal management and other rare publications have existed on subscriber and newsstand sales alone. The bimonthly feminist *Ms.* magazine, for example, did not suffer as much as other publications during the same recession period because it does not accept advertising. With a circulation around 110,000, it has not depended on advertising since it was co-founded by social activist Gloria Steinem in 1971.

One interesting area of growth has been in alternative newsweekly publications. These are magazine-like hybrid periodicals that are often published in newsprint in tabloid format. Some have gone online only in recent years. The alternatives are often monthlies or biweeklies and usually serve specific geographic markets such as a metropolitan area. The newsweekly *Nashville Scene*, part of Village Voice Media, is one example. *New Times* draws thousands of readers in the Miami, Denver, Dallas, Fort Lauderdale-Palm Beach, and Phoenix metropolitan markets. *Creative Loafing*, which is an Atlanta-based alternative founded in 1972, publishes editions in several cities, including Charlotte, Tampa Bay, Sarasota, and Miami, in the southeastern United States.

The news and feature-based content of alternative publications is often magazine length and magazine quality and offers writing assignment opportunities for both freelance and staff feature writers. These publications are popular with young adults who seek information and listings about the arts, current events, local nightlife and music, young adult lifestyles, movies and local theatre, and other forms of entertainment. However, these publications often do not stop with that – they also offer in-depth features such as profiles and investigative reporting on current issues. The publications often fill a void left by the more mainstream newspapers and lifestyle magazines of their markets. Typical alternative readers tend to be young, between Gen Zers and millennials between 18 and 45, and they live a very active lifestyle. These readers are well-educated news readers with a good income (Smith & Davis, 1997).

Sports-oriented magazines have developed and grown online in recent years. *Sports Illustrated* has reinvented itself. In addition, sports magazines oriented to women have been growing in recent years – publishers and advertisers realize that the valuable market is growing and still up for grabs.

Women's magazines remain popular and successful at most levels. New titles are announced each year. Although some do not generate the advertising support to continue, others flourish in the era of specialty publications.

One category of magazines showing encouraging growth is magazines geared to children and young teens. These include *Sports Illustrated for Kids* and *National Geographic Little Kids*. Articles often focus on indoor and outdoor activities, travel, food, the environment, basic science, television programs, clothing, toys such as video games, and activities designed to enhance quality time with parents.

One subset drawing attention is magazines oriented to teenage girls such as *Teen Vogue* and *American Teen*. *Seventeen* is the oldest, with roots back to 1944. Geared to high school females, *Seventeen* has been successful and emulated much during the past 80 years. Today, there are magazines aimed at the same market, but there are other popular teen publications. While some have eventually failed, endeavors such as

these show the continuing evolution of the magazine market. Writers, as well as editors and publishers, must keep track of the evolving industry.

Lifestyle publications are popular today. Leading the parade to the newsstand are a collection of specialty books called city and regional magazines. They continue their modern era that began in the 1960s. These include well-known titles such as *Vogue, Southern Living, Country Living, Town & Country, GQ, Prevention, Wine Spectator, Harper's Bazaar,* and *Vanity Fair*. Their evolution from the chamber of commerce publications or urban survival manuals has resulted in a genre of magazines that focus on how we live in cities and their suburbs. They offer high-level and high-quantity service journalism to readers. These provide alternative voices to local newspapers and television and offer lifestyle feature content focusing on housing, food, entertainment, travel, and other leisure activities.

Parenting and family publications remain popular, but periodicals emphasizing the skills of parenting and family development have grown in popularity in the past decade. *Parenting*, *Parentlife*, *Sesame Street* (a supplement to *Parenting*), and *Exceptional Parent* (also called *EP*) are examples of parent-oriented magazines. Family magazines include *Disney FamilyFun, Working Mother, You & Your Family, South Florida Family Life, San Diego Family*, and *Parents Latina*.

Chapter 2

Careers as Feature Writers and Editors

Melissa Cantor is currently a news editor at the social media platform LinkedIn in New York City, where she covers topics in the headlines of the day, ranging from Beyoncé and the back-to-the-office Botox boom to corporate earnings and shake-ups and general news. She was an editor at Microsoft News from 2017 to 2020 and prior to that worked on media launches for NBC, America Online, and national magazine groups. Her writing has been published by CNN, *New York Magazine*, V, *New Beauty* and LVMH. Early in her career, she worked as a senior editor of *Miami Modern Luxury* magazine. Her career as a writer and editor evolved in a conventional manner. An award-winning fiction writer, she came to the United States from Honduras in Central America. She earned her bachelor's degree at the University of Miami in 2003 and, at the same time, interned at the edgy fashion magazine *Zink* and eventually became its editor.

Cantor did not wish to leave South Florida when *Zink* relocated to New York City, so she returned to school to earn a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing. Not long after finishing the degree, she became part of a team of three persons that launched and edited a real estate trade magazine published every two weeks, *Miami Agent*. Cantor eventually left *Miami Agent* and became senior editor of the monthly *Palm Beach Illustrated* magazine. During her time at the high-end readership magazine, she wrote regular art and design columns, contributed to several front- and back-of-the-book sections, and wrote features about Palm Beach's elite lifestyles, high society, and celebrity-level residents.

"All of my writing, regardless of the genre, is a combination of the sensibilities I've developed while working simultaneously as a journalist and a fiction writer," she tells readers of her own Web site, MelissaCantor.com (Cantor, 2022). "I hope that my articles benefit from a strong sense of character or place, or a creative use of language, depending on what is called for. I also do my best to make sure that my literary endeavors are grounded in fact and real-world relevance."

"I create meaningful commerce experiences at the intersection of editorial and retail. I am a versatile digital storyteller who has shaped brand stories for Tiffany & Co., L'Oréal and Ralph Lauren across websites, mobile apps, newsletters, and social media," she explained.

Cantor has published fiction in essays and writes novels in the little bits of free time she can carve out of her busy schedule. As an editor, finding time for her own writing is often a challenge. But she does try:

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> Because the workload is so heavy, I don't take on too many features. I tend to write shorter pieces (and freelance). I don't have a specialization in terms of my feature writing. But I do steer clear of food reviews! In terms of writing, it has been easier for me to identify my weaknesses versus any strengths, and I enjoy the variety of writing about different topics. I find that my writing can feel repetitive (to me), and I can get very bored of my voice, which seems to permeate all the journalism work that I do, so mixing up the topics helps mitigate that. I can't imagine committing to a single area of writing any time soon. Criticism in general is not my strong suit, with the exception of fashion (reviewing collections). In general, I write a lot of profiles, interior design stories, and stories about fashion and design. I approach everything with research. When I begin to research, whether it's a designer or a homeowner or a neighborhood, I instantly start writing the story in my head, even if what I eventually write about ends up being very different.
>
> The two things that have probably most contributed to my success are my ability to produce clean and accurate copy (I'm a stickler for grammar and, as an editor, I know that this is both rare and much appreciated, and I always verify my facts), and how much I read. I love magazines, and reading them constantly not only gives me ideas, but excellent writing inspires me, as do the creative ways in which people present information and draw in readers.
>
> As far as tricks, again, my biggest tip is reading. I tend to be someone who senses her lead instantly while doing an interview or research, and if I don't, I get very stuck. Reading others helps get my creativity going, and particularly if I can see how others have approached the same topic, it helps me decide which angle to take. I also find that a couple of days of distance from a story makes a world of difference. When I am writing a story, I am so close to it that I can no longer read it objectively, while if I return to it a few days later, I can immediately sense what it needs.
>
> As far as advice for young writers, I know that I often have been—and still am sometimes—afraid to ask questions. It can be intimidating to interview someone who is well-known, and I think young writers in particular are hesitant to push any buttons, but I've found that the times when I failed to ask a question, I regretted it much more than the times when I did and perhaps angered someone by doing so.

Cantor wrote a story titled "Class Distinctions" for *Palm Beach Illustrated* magazine that took a close look at Palm Beach County, a wealthy South Florida region north of Miami and Fort Lauderdale, and its leading private schools. Cantor prepared two sidebar stories to go with the main story, one containing a list of basic information about five leading prep schools and the other discussing important factors involving the schools that go beyond classroom teaching and facilities, such as consistency and faith-based educational components.

"'Class Distinctions' was perhaps one of the most difficult I've written. There was so much information to wade through, so many interviews to conduct and schools to tour and it was so difficult to try and present a balanced perspective when there were so many issues on which people have opposing but valid viewpoints," Cantor stated. "I think it was successful because the schools I was writing about all happened to be so remarkable and provided so many interesting talking points; and the people I interviewed were eloquent and dedicated. Both facts made my job infinitely easier.

In the end, I hope that in the story and the accompanying sidebars, I raised questions for people who live in a world where elite private schools are the norm. And for those who do not, I hope I provided a window into this fascinating world. The most important reporting strategy in this instance was to talk to as many people as possible, on and off the record, so that I had a real sense of this environment, rather than simply what people tell you when they know it will be published."

This is her complete story with sidebar information box content:

In prepping children for the Ivy Leagues, academic excellence is no longer enough. The age of the superstudent has dawned. PBI examines the options at the county's top private schools.

In the stratospheres of high society, there is an oft-told joke about spots at elite private schools being harder-and occasionally pricier-to obtain than prime real estate. But while the joke is old, the urgency and truth behind the statement have never been greater. And never before have they sparked such furor.

According to an April 9 article in the L.A. Times, *the acceptance rates at Stanford, Yale and Columbia for the fall semester of 2007 were 10.3 percent, 9.6 percent and 8.9 percent, respectively. Eleven hundred students who were rejected by Harvard University this year had achieved perfect math scores on their SATs. UCLA set a national record when it received more than 50,000 applications. Some experts attribute such statistics to the college ranking system started by universities in the 1980s as a marketing strategy devised to boost application numbers. Today, the rankings by publications such as the* U.S. News and World Report *and the* Princeton Review *are interpreted as anything but propaganda, and most of the best students in the nation direct their applications to the same small group of top-tier universities.*

But the sheer number of applications is not the only reason admission rates at big-name colleges are down. An April 1 cover story in the New York Times *suggested that we live in the age of the "superstudent," a breed of highly accomplished, Ivy Leaguers-in-the-making, for whom demonstrated excellence in multiple extracurricular fields is merely requisite, and a 4.0 grade-point average is a disappointment (weighted grading systems that account for advanced classes now make 5.0 GPAs possible).*

In this new competitive field, where scholastic excellence, artistic and athletic triumphs, and the rarely mentioned but hardly insignificant factor of pedigree are no longer guarantees that a child will gain entry into a top university, parents are scrambling to ensure that their child has an advantage. That advantage often comes in the form of education at elite private schools that boast a high number of Ivy League admissions for alumni-but gaining entrance into one of these schools now goes far beyond putting a name on a waiting list at the time of conception.

Baby Be Bright

An official at a top Palm Beach County private school, who declined to be identified, tells PBI that some parents begin vying for admission while their sons or daughters are still infants. "Parents call and ask me what daycares we prefer,

thinking that will improve their child's chances of being admitted into our institution," he says. "My answer is always for them to choose whichever place is best for their child, but the parents rarely believe me."

The skepticism is not unwarranted. After all, the extensive admissions processes at these schools belie the rhetoric. Older students supplement the rigorous entrance exam and interview with transcripts, extracurricular activities and recommendations, but the potential of younger students is sometimes assessed by their performance on a single test or their behavior during an interview.

"Kindergarten is our most competitive entry point," says Kilian Forgus, director of admissions at Saint Andrews School, a K-through-12 school in Boca Raton. "We look for adult-friendly kids. The faculty is involved with students every step of the way, and if a child cannot interact with adults, he or she is going to have a hard time succeeding at Saint Andrews."

John Thompson, who was head of school at Palm Beach Day Academy for 19 years until he retired this past spring, admits that deciding which young students have the most potential for success in a rigorous academic environment is not an easy task. "You can give older kids a spontaneous writing exercise, and you'll learn more about them in five minutes than you would in two months," he says. "With two-, three-, four-, and five-year-olds, it's as much an art as it is a science. You have to sit and talk with them for an indication that they've been brought up in an environment where ideas and books and reading and conversation play a role."

As Thompson implies, the perceived character of the parents can affect an admissions decision-for better or for worse. "Because we consider ourselves a family, we look to make sure that the parents share the values of the school," says Gene Gross, head of school at The Benjamin School, a PK-through-12 school in North Palm Beach. "We want people who understand the value of education. We're trying to develop kids who not only succeed at individual classes, but become lifelong learners. We want kids who learn not because it's going to get them somewhere, but because they realize it's important in this society to be literate and to struggle with the issues that confront democracy."

Making the Grade

Part of the reason the admissions processes at these schools are so rigorous is because the academic challenges a student will face after acceptance are no less so. Elite private schools walk the fine line between placing too many demands on students and developing curricula that will impress the admission committees at colleges and universities where virtually all the applicants are top-notch. These curricula, as in the case of Pine Crest School, which serves grades PK through 12 in its Fort Lauderdale campus and grades PK through 8 in its Boca Raton campus, can go so far as to require that children in prekindergarten study Mandarin.

"We are preparing students for the evolving global society of tomorrow," says Pine Crest President Dr. Lourdes Cowgill, who integrated the Chinese-language program into the lower school curriculum last year. "China is a significant

economic and social power, and it is important for our future leaders to be exposed to their language."

The demanding approach is certainly effective-the 2006 class at Pine Crest included 19 National Merit Scholarship finalists, nine National Merit Scholars, one academic Presidential Scholarship candidate, and one Presidential Scholarship candidate in the arts. But in spite of the impressive statistics, some parents wonder how much is too much.

"I just worry that my daughter won't get the chance to be a kid," says Vivian Kafie, a Boca Raton resident who gave birth to daughter Nicole last year and is currently in the process of wading through potential schools. "I want her to be successful and have the best education we can provide, but at some point you ask yourself how much of this is really necessary. Do I want to sacrifice her childhood for the sake of her educational future?"

Forgus says the choice need not be that drastic. "All schools-public, private, parochial, or charter-have a range of learners," he says. "We have quality kids here at Saint Andrews, but not every student is on a highly accelerated track. That's not who we are. We will never be an academic pressure cooker where we lose sight of each individual student, and that's especially important in the lower school."

In order to serve the varying needs of students, Saint Andrews has implemented what it calls "flexible learning groups." In the lower school, they employ a two-teacher model, where two degreed teachers (not a teacher and a teacher's aide, Forgus stresses) are placed in each classroom. "It's an opportunity for teachers to individualize the curriculum," Forgus says. "It allows us to better serve the needs of both the accelerated learners and a learner who might need extra support in a specific area."

Margi Picotte, whose children attended Rosarian Academy in West Palm Beach, completed an eight-year term on the PK-through-8 school's board of directors in May. Her eldest daughter graduated from Rosarian's middle school in 2005, and her twin children graduated this past spring. She says the differentiated method of learning adopted by independent schools taught her children how to build on individual strengths.

"My twins are really strong at math, and they were two of five people in their class who graduated middle school having completed a high school geometry honors class," Picotte says. "They were able to advance in a field for which they showed an aptitude, while someone like my eldest daughter, who has other strengths, wasn't bogged down trying to keep up with work that might have been too advanced for her particular skill set."

However, many school officials readily admit that the pace at top private schools is hard to keep up with-and that's something they're proud of. "We are an academic preschool," says Sister Corinne Sanders, Rosarian's principal. "We always make it clear to the parents that neither our Montessori nor our lower school is a daycare center. We follow the Core Knowledge preschool curriculum,

and students are assessed by its standards. In kindergarten, we take it to yet another level, and the children start learning Spanish."

At The Benjamin School, students in kindergarten take two languages: Spanish and French. Kindergarten and first-grade students take a semester of each language during each academic year-eventually choosing one language to study through the fourth grade. They also have the option to switch languages, or continue with the same one, from fifth through eighth grade.

In the eighth grade, the Palm Beach Day Academy institutes a speech program, in which students are judged on both organized and extemporaneous speaking. "The program is demanding," says Thompson, "but we start preparing them for it as early as kindergarten. We have a weekly assembly every Friday, and at some point during the school year, every student will speak at that assembly once or twice in front of 500 people."

Varsity Blues

While students certainly don't have it easy in the lower and middle schools, high school is when college preparatory work really begins, and the intensity of the demands is accelerated accordingly. At Benjamin's upper school, which is located on a separate campus in Palm Beach Gardens, there is a three-year foreign-language requirement for graduation, regardless of what foreign-language work the student has done in lower or middle school. Additional graduation requirements include four years of math and English, and three each of history and science.

At Saint Andrews School, advanced elective courses are on par with those offered at top universities, with class choices ranging from Organic Chemistry to Introduction to Pop Songwriting. Saint Andrews is one of 200 high schools in the nation, and the only school in South Florida, certified to teach engineering. Graduation requirements here include a Life Skills course, which examines contemporary health and social issues facing adolescents, such as substance abuse and eating disorders.

In addition to the academic requirements, upper school students at Saint Andrews and The Benjamin School must participate in both the arts and athletics. Saint Andrews offers its students the option of substituting participation in a sports team with physical education courses, but at Benjamin, all upper school students must play on a team for at least one season every year.

Gross admits that few students can excel in so many different areas, and that this is the intention. "We want kids to understand both their strengths and their weaknesses, and to learn how to succeed and how to fail," he says. "We like to get kids outside their comfort zone, and we try to ask someone who might be great academically to stretch him or herself artistically and athletically. Our philosophy is that we want to bend every child, but to break none."

Parents like Kafie might hesitate upon hearing such statements, but Thompson says most parents and children are prepared for the rigors of attending an elite independent school. "Parental anxiety is something we do address, and we make it clear to parents that we have very high expectations of them and of their child,"

Thompson says. "The children here excel in so many different fields, but they don't complain about it. By virtue of their birth, or achievement, or both, they are going to be leaders in the community. They need to multitask, and they need not only to be able to do it, but to do it well and with a smile on their faces, and still go out to dances on Friday night and have boyfriends and girlfriends. And our kids realize that it's what they've accepted as a child of their family."

But along with the high standards that school officials stress, each also recognizes the importance of a school community, and describes their school's environment as nurturing. Benjamin, which has an advisory program established to ensure that students are challenged but not overwhelmed, is even considering decreasing its size in order to best serve its students. "We want to make sure the children know each other well, and that the faculty knows each of them well," Gross says.

Sanders says the sense of community at Rosarian is best felt during the voluntary Friday morning prayer at the flagpole. "Ninety percent of our students participate in it," she says. "It's informal, and we just pray together-for ill parents, or for students who have brothers or sisters in the Middle East, for example. It's a meaningful time where the kids know that they can gather and bring all their hopes to God, but in a community."

Kafie still jokes about home schooling and has not yet decided where she will send Nicole when the time comes, but she says one thought comforts her: "If I start debating about the use of teaching kids any one given subject, it causes me to have doubts," she says. "But I just have to remind myself that that's not what a great school does. A great school teaches kids how to belong and how to succeed."

SIDEBAR: Beyond the Classroom

With several institutions of comparable caliber to choose from, geography and a school's strength in a child's area of interest (be it academic, athletic, or artistic) help parents decide where to enroll their children. Here are some other factors to consider:

A MATTER OF FAITH

Several of these schools integrate faith components into their philosophies, and their administrators say it helps not only builds moral character, but also serves as a support system for students. Rosarian is owned by an order of Adrian Dominican sisters, and has required daily prayers at the beginning of the day, as well as at the beginning of every class. Saint Andrews is founded in the Episcopal tradition, but it is not owned by a religious order. The school requires its students to attend chapel, but the topics addressed at chapel are often led by faculty and can vary from listening to a choral performance to yoga exercises. Pine Crest is an all-faith campus with voluntary all-faith services. The Chaplaincy program exists so that spirituality can be a part of everyday life on campus.

CONSISTENCY IS KEY

While "pre-prep" schools that go up to eighth grade often have relationships with elite upper schools, some parents prefer to send their child to a single school from start to finish. The Benjamin School is the only PK-through-12 school in the

county, but Saint Andrews school is a K-through-12 institution, and graduates of Pine Crest's Boca Raton campus are invited to complete their preparatory education at the Fort Lauderdale campus' upper school.

TO BOARD OR NOT TO BOARD

Saint Andrews School is the only boarding school in South Florida, with students representing more than 20 nationalities. The boarding option is appealing to parents who do not live in Palm Beach County year-round, as well as to those who want their children to be schooled in an international environment.

SIDEBAR 2: The Report Card

THE BENJAMIN SCHOOL, North Palm Beach and Palm Beach Gardens
(561-626-3747, thebenjaminschool.org)
Grades: PK through 12
Student population: 1, 320
Student/faculty ratio: 8:1
Advanced placement courses: 19
Program highlights: use of technology; visual arts
2006–2007 tuition: lower, $12,985-$16,060; middle, $16,555-$17,280; upper, $18,605-$18,800
Financial Aid: $2 million in need-based aid yearly to 13 percent of the student body
Endowment: $3 million

PALM BEACH DAY ACADEMY, Palm Beach and West Palm Beach
(561-832-8815, 561-655-1188, palmbeachdayacademy.org)
Grades: PK2 through 9
Student population: 530
Student/faculty ratio: 7.5:1
Program highlights: strong emphasis on writing; public-speaking program
2006–2007 tuition: $12,000–$18,000
Financial aid: need-based aid to 12.1 percent of the student body
Endowment: $10.1 million

PINE CREST SCHOOL, Fort Lauderdale and Boca Raton
(954-492-4100, 561-852-2800, pinecrest.edu)
Grades: PK through 8, Boca Raton; PK through 12, Fort Lauderdale
Student population: 898, Boca Raton; 1,680, Fort Lauderdale
Student/faculty ratio: 12:1
Advanced placement courses: 31
Program highlights: foreign language program; college preparatory
2006–2007 tuition: lower, $15,680–$16,650; middle, $17,950; upper, $19,240
Financial aid: $1.4 million in need-based aid in 2004-2005
Endowment: $44 million for both campuses

ROSARIAN ACADEMY, West Palm Beach
(561-832-5131, rosarian.org)
Grades: PK3 through 8

Student population: 500
Student/faculty ratio: 10:1
Program highlights: emphasis on community service; sacramental preparation for Catholic rites
2006–2007 tuition: lower, 11,095; middle $11,195
Financial aid: need-based aid to 16.6 percent of the student body
Endowment: $1.2 million

SAINT ANDREWS SCHOOL, Boca Raton
(561-210-2000, saintandrewsschool.net)
Grades: K through 12
Student population: 1,155
Student/faculty ratio: 9:1
Advanced placement courses: 21
Program highlights: international trip is part of 10th grade curriculum; all-star athletics
2006–2007 tuition: lower, $15,100; middle, $17,950; upper, $19,350; boarding $34,850
Financial aid: $1.6 million in need-based aid yearly to 10 percent of student body
Endowment: $10 million

(Cantor, 2007, pp. 70–77, 118) (Reprinted with permission, *Palm Beach Illustrated* magazine.)

Cantor's career development, as both a writer and magazine editor, has been, in many ways, ideal for a feature writer. Every person has a different background and set of experiences that helps them in their writing life. These circumstances and experiences helped Melissa Cantor find her writing career in magazine and celebrity journalism. Unless you know absolutely what you're going to write about, having a varied personal and professional background keeps your writing options open and creates opportunities you might not imagine until they come along. When you're inevitably asked to write about something you know nothing about, you can begin with confidence.

Magazine Feature Writing

Magazine features are different from newspaper features in several ways. First, nonstaff members of a magazine often write these articles. Many writers are attracted to the freedom of freelance writing and can make good supplemental income as part-time freelance writers. However, it is quite difficult to make a substantial career and a living from freelance writing. Many writers do well selling their work to magazines while working another career.

There are many opportunities for magazine-oriented, nonfiction writers. As a freelance writer, you can select the subject, the market, and the magazine for which you wish to write. You can specialize if you desire to do so, or you can be a generalist who writes on whatever subject is appealing. You can set your own work schedule for writing and researching articles. A staff writer for a newspaper or a magazine staff member cannot enjoy this freedom most of the time. You can set up an office at home or elsewhere, but you are responsible for whatever costs you incur. The expenses for such

things as equipment, furniture, and supplies must come out of your writer's fees. And it follows that you can live wherever you want as an independent writer. However, there are no guarantees for freelancers and the road to success is challenging.

The magazine industry continues to change. New magazines debut. Existing brands fold. The new publications mean a beginning of opportunities for feature writers, but the failures also mean the end of other opportunities. You have a reasonable chance as an unknown writer to be published by a successful major magazine. However, you do have to work hard on good ideas at the right time. Magazine feature writing is a field with tremendous opportunity. With hundreds of major magazines and thousands more of specialized business publications, you can do much as a magazine feature writer—if you have the motivation. Magazines, like newspapers, have their own styles or personalities.

Part of this is the design, or look, of the magazine, but the other major part is the writing style. Magazine writing is generally in essay form with longer, more fully developed paragraphs. Usages are more formalized, also. Despite occasional changes in established publications or the debut of completely new ones, you will find that magazine writing itself tends to be somewhat constant. After all, good writing is good writing. Magazine articles, generally, do tend to be more descriptive and detailed than newspaper writing, but this is partly due to the additional space given to major features in magazines.

As noted earlier, these stories are a bit more subjective as writers offer their perspectives on the subject. Each spring, the American Society of Magazine Editors (ASME; http://asme.magazine.org) presents its National Magazine Awards, known as "Ellies," for editorial excellence in magazine publishing. To be honored signifies that a writer or publication has reached the top of the class. The awards are often referred to as the "Oscars" of the magazine industry.

In 2022, *The Atlantic* was named for "general excellence" among the nation's news, sports, and entertainment magazines. *The Atlantic* also won top honors in the feature writing category for a piece by Jennifer Senior about the family a man left behind when he died on 9–11, September 11, 2001. The story told readers about the family's struggles over the two decades since the World Trade Center towers collapsed in a terrorist attack. Her story was also honored with the 2022 Pulitzer Prize in feature writing (see https://www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-category/211).

Harper's Bazaar was selected among service and lifestyle magazines. For special interest magazines, *Car and Driver* was honored. In literature, science, and politics, the top honor was presented to *Stranger's Guide*. *The New Yorker* was awarded the top prize for profile writing for its look at psychologist Elizabeth Loftus by writer Rachel Aviv. And Carina del Valle Schorske earned the top award from ASME for the essays and criticism category for her look at how dance anchored a community during the pandemic (American Society of Magazine Editors, 2022). The Ellies, named after the Alexander Calder Stabile "elephant" that symbolizes the award, were introduced in 1966 by ASME and the graduate journalism program at Columbia University. ASME grew out of, and continues to be affiliated with, the Magazine Publishers of America (http://www.magazine.org).

Just remember that, regardless of the writing approach and topic, you will find the magazine industry to be quite different from what it once was. Individuals beginning careers as magazine writers in the postwar 1940s and 1950s found general interest

magazines flourishing. Due to the influences of social media, television, and other mass media on society, leisure time demands are quite different now. To meet this challenge, magazines began to specialize.

Your writing challenge is to handle specialized subjects with the authority of an expert. This is still another reason magazine feature writing differs so much from newspaper feature writing. Magazine feature writers are most often freelance writers. Most magazines maintain very small full-time writing staff, and most staff members are responsible for post-writing production activities such as editing, design and layout, graphics, and other tasks rather than original writing and reporting. Therefore, magazines depend on freelance writers, or they solicit work from known freelance writers.

The traditional staff feature writer position at a magazine will vary, depending on the category of the magazine. At a news magazine, for example, the differences between writers and reporters remain great. The functions of writer and information gatherer differ widely for large news organizations such as *Time* or *Newsweek*. Although more and more reporter-originated material is being published, reporters in bureaus around the world still produce information, some of it in memo form, for writers in the main offices to organize and perfect through rewriting. At other types of magazines, the work of reporter and writer is less specialized. Most staffers, especially those at specialized consumer magazines, write and report. At some smaller magazines, writers may also double as editors to help handle material that comes from experts and freelance writers.

The routine at magazines, although deadlines are less frequent, is still like that at newspapers for editors and staff writers. The pressure as the deadline approaches is intense. Expectations are high. Performance can be no less than top level. Hours are often not within the standard 9-to-5, Monday through Friday, week that beginners might expect from the corporate publishing world.

Because some magazine companies are organizing into groups under single ownership and, often, single publishers and editors, this could mean a growing emphasis on staff writers and a shrinking emphasis on freelancers.

If you do not become a magazine staff writer, your life as a freelance writer for a magazine will be quite different. You are your own boss until you commit to work for a publication on an assignment. Your work will require that you interact with many editors throughout a year, and you will likely be an employee of several bosses at one time.

Small magazines, particularly those on college campuses, offer the best chance for regular work for beginning feature writers. It is also a different working environment. Writers are less specialized within the scope of the magazine and are asked to produce a greater variety of writing, reporting, editing, and production work. Staff members may be closer at smaller publications because of the need to interact more often. Writers and editors work together more frequently and often exchange duties. Writers become editors. Editors become writers. Publishers become editors and writers. A beginner can learn a variety of feature-writing skills.

Newspaper Feature Writing

What makes a newspaper feature different from a magazine or newsletter feature? There are several answers to that question that go beyond simple frequency or timing of publication. Newspaper features are used throughout the newspaper, but some sections use features more often and very differently from others. The front section,

generally containing the spot news of the day from the state, national, and international sources, uses features for balance. Features in these sections offer insight into the day's newsmakers and major events. Features are used as sidebars to supplement straight reporting. For example, a story about a mass shooting at a Fourth of July parade in a Chicago suburb might be boosted by a feature sidebar focusing on one or more of the victims. The president's announcement of a nomination for a U.S. Supreme Court justice position will often be supplemented by a feature profile of the career of the person named as a candidate.

The local section of many daily newspapers often runs features on unusual individuals or events of community interest. Certainly, local sidebar features are also used. However, newspapers that have segmented their local news coverage into neighborhood sections frequently fill these sections with features about people, schools, religions, home repair, home sales, pets, arts and crafts, parks and recreation, and small businesses. In lifestyle and living sections, editors devote most of the day's space to a wide variety of feature materials. These stories focus on home how-to-do-it subjects, consumer and shopping ideas, profiles, health and medicine suggestions, parenting and child-care, gardening, cooking, and food and drink. In some newspapers, entertainment and arts news is part of lifestyle coverage, but this category of news creates a different set of feature needs for newspapers. Writers specializing in entertainment and the arts provide features on individuals, reviews of performances, and insight into their creative activities.

Sports sections provide feature content to break the routine of game or event stories. Features also supplement spot sports coverage. Regular readers look for features such as profiles of coaches and players, descriptions of facilities, and in-depth analysis of outstanding strategies and performances. Sports features are less focused on professionals and outstanding amateurs than they were a decade ago. Editors have found that readers want to read features about participation sports, such as jogging and swimming, in addition to the National Football League or Major League Baseball. Editors have also learned that readers would like increased feature coverage of "minor" sports such as soccer, giving writers more opportunities and broader scope for features than in past decades.

Business sections have experienced growth in many daily newspapers in recent years. Even newspapers that do not have separate business sections—such as special tabloids on Mondays—still devote considerable space to business news and features. For writers interested in business, this is an upbeat and opportune time for you. These section editors demand regular features describing new companies, new products, consumerism, successful executives, and trends in the marketplace.

A Business Editor and her View of Writing

Lisa Gibbs, director of News Partnerships for the Associated Press

Lisa Gibbs is the director of News Partnerships for the Associated Press and coordinates the AP newsroom's collaborations with foundations, emerging technology companies and other media organizations. She is a former executive business editor for the *Miami Herald* and has devoted her 30-year journalism career to newspaper and magazine writing and editing. Before she joined *The*

Herald in 2004, she was a senior writer for *Money* magazine and South Florida editor of *Florida Trend* magazine. She also covered courts and business for the *Daily Business Review* and started her reporting career at the *Miami Herald*. A University of Miami journalism graduate, she is served on the board of the Society of American Business Editors and Writers (SABEW). Her business section was named "Best in Business" by SABEW. Gibbs was asked to discuss the role of writing and editing business news:

> Many journalists perceive that business writing is boring, because it is 'all about numbers' I tell them that covering business really is about covering money and power, and what is more fascinating than that? A company tells investors how much it earned last quarter—sure, that sounds like it could be dull. But an earnings report is really just a window into a bigger story, how that company is fighting to sell more of its products than its competitors and the people who are working long hours to make it happen. Who are they and what motivates them? How far as they willing to go to succeed? What are the obstacles? Good business features, whether written for newspapers or magazines, explore the stories behind the companies and the entrepreneurs that fuel our economy and why they matter.
>
> Working for magazines is where I first learned how to think about my stories in terms that normally would be used in movie screenwriting: character, plot, pacing. Any good feature story needs a protagonist, that main character who becomes the vehicle through which we tell the larger story. For example, imagine you have collected a bunch of statistics about the local real estate market that reveal how difficult selling a home has become. Instead of writing about just the facts, you go out to real estate open houses and find the people who are struggling to sell their homes right now. We pick one or two or three and tell their stories: who are they and why they need to sell, how long they've been trying, their growing frustration. Set it up as chapters and don't reveal too much right away – draw the reader in and make them want to know what happens next.
>
> As more and more news migrates to the Internet, it would be easy to conclude that appetites for business features are shrinking. I don't believe it. Readers still want to know how things work and why, who stands to lose and who might win big. Great narrative feature writing still can be found, certainly in places like *Fortune* and *Wired* magazines, and in the *Wall Street Journal*. Even most regional metropolitan dailies, where news space and staffs are getting smaller, realize that explanatory, narrative features are one of the things we do best.
>
> That doesn't mean nothing is changing. Long narrative pieces aren't the only way to produce features. Alternative storytelling methods such as Q & As are getting more popular. We film videos with our stories to help convey personalities. We look to even have some fun once in a while, like when we write our end of the year "Biz Quiz" on the important business stories of the

> year. We chose a local startup company, three guys fresh out of college who wanted to open a cereal restaurant and followed them for a year. We wrote monthly installments chronicling their ups and downs, almost like a reality show in print. The series was extremely popular: readers asked me about it, they wandered into the restaurant and made suggestions, business classes used the articles as case studies.
>
> (Personal communication to author, September 28, 2008)

Feature material is also found occasionally on the opinion or editorial pages. It is often in the form of a column or other type of opinion essay, but the same general principles of feature writing have been used to write the feature column. These creative columnists and essayists use satire for humor, or write a profile of an individual, or give how-to-do-it advice on a subject. Newspapers have outlets for magazine-style writing. The Sunday magazine supplements of major daily newspapers depend a great deal on solid feature essay writing of traditional magazine length each week to build regular readership.

Feature subjects are wide-ranging in nature. From humor columns to portraits of individuals to accounts of historical events to chronologies of conflicts, these articles are the foundations of weekend sections. Weekend sections also include shorter departmentalized features, such as listings of events, reviews of new restaurants, and summaries of new products on the market.

Newspaper features are usually much shorter in length than magazine features, but this tendency does not hold as firmly as it once did. It is not unusual to find a 3,000-word feature story in a newspaper, but more often online than in print editions, even in an era influenced by the multimedia of the news sites on the Web. And, of course, magazines often run short feature items, also. However, the majority of newspaper features are short and to the point—500 to 1,000 words. Space does not often provide the chance for depth and development of "characters" in the article. Frequency of publication does, however, provide the opportunity for newspaper features to be timelier than magazine features.

Newspapers depend less on outside material than do magazines. Because most newspapers have staff of writers and reporters and are paying members of news services, most do not buy much freelance material. Weekend travel sections or pages, however, are an exception because very few newspapers employ full-time travel writers other than a travel editor. Certainly, newspaper feature stories are produced in a shorter deadline framework. There are not too many newspaper feature writers who have not had to research, write, and turn in a complete feature within a few hours. Although this also occurs in magazine feature writing, it is not as likely to happen with monthly or weekly deadlines.

Newspaper feature writers come in two varieties. The most common is the staff writer, an individual who works full-time or steady part-time for a single publication. Freelance newspaper feature writers may write for local newspapers, but most newspapers do not use their work as often as they use staff-written or news service feature material. Most newspaper staff members work regular schedules. Most work 40 or more hours a week, but some that work on salary find their schedule and

demands of the job require more than the conventional week. The work of newspaper feature writers is not limited to a 9-to-5, Monday through Friday, schedule, and the work is also not limited to "scheduled" times. Most top newspaper feature writers, even on a regular work schedule, find they never really stop working even when off duty. If you want to succeed, you must take advantage of the opportunity whenever a good feature prospect presents itself.

Feature writers for small dailies and weeklies are more oriented to produce finished stories, often at the expense of quality. This makes it a challenge to develop certain skills as a writer, but it also hastens the development of the discipline to write fast and to get the job done.

Whether you work general assignment, or a specialization called a beat, the intense nature of newspaper feature writing dictates that you always be prepared. With daily, two or three times a week, or even weekly deadlines, a large amount of feature production is expected. You must have an endless stream of strong ideas to develop into stories. You should not "switch off" your alertness as a feature writer.

There are challenges and rewards that come from working in this environment. The challenge of the newspaper feature writer is to know a great deal about a wide range of subjects in each community. For specialists on beats at newspapers, the challenge is to know a great deal about a restricted range of subjects, but you carry the burden of responsibility for your entire publication.

As a newspaper staff writer, you take advantage of public familiarity with your newspaper. Few communities now have more than one newspaper. If you work for that newspaper or your community weekly, readers and sources will recognize it immediately. This means you have stories come to you, and you might find a higher level of cooperation from sources. You also enjoy the advantage of being known by readers. The community you serve as a feature writer will know your name. If you are good, this can become a major asset in your work as a feature writer. If you are not professional in your work, it becomes the opposite—a liability.

Online Feature Writing

Digital versions of newspapers, magazines, and newsletters date to the middle of the 1990s. However, there were few publications that existed solely in their electronic form until recently. The shrinking newspaper industry, increasing printing costs, and higher distribution expenses have changed all this. Online journalism is growing and will become a force of its own in the future. There are increasing numbers of newspapers and magazines online and in digital form only. We see online feature writing on news Web sites, on social media sites such as organization pages, on institutional Web sites, in the form of public relations news releases, in numerous blogs, and many other online sites, locations, formats, and platforms.

It has already become a valid alternative for feature writers. The maturity of the Web, with its multimedia and overall ease of use compared to earlier online formats, has brought digital publications into the homes of millions of readers around the world. The growth of this new medium continues to be rapid and extensive.

Newspapers continue to become very sophisticated online. Their content often goes well beyond the printed editions and are much timelier. Content not only comes from staff writers and editors, often called content producers, but from news services and,

occasionally, from freelance writers. Newspaper digital content is fully based in digital media. An award-winning example of this is writer John Branch's "Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek" for *The New York Times* (see https://www.nytimes.com/projects/2012/snow-fall/index.html). This award-winning package took six months to prepare and tells the story of people trapped in an avalanche in Washington state in gripping detail with video, audio, interactive content, and other multimedia storytelling tools. In many ways, this story presentation, requiring the work of numerous people (a graphics and design team of 11 staffers, including 1 photographer, 3 video staffers, and 1 researcher), beyond the writer himself, set the standard for newspaper content online in the past decade. It won major awards, including the 2013 Pulitzer Prize in feature writing and a Peabody Award. The project shows how newspapers with the right resources have embraced the potential for digital storytelling.

There has also been the growth of small Web-based digital magazines. These topical online publications are often called "zines." Zines do not originate in printed form but certainly were built on the printed magazine tradition. They are often highly specialized. Zines have been described as "independent publications characterized by idiosyncratic themes, low circulation, irregular frequency, ephemeral duration, and noncommercial orientation" (Rauch, 2002, p. 1). Almost overnight, these energetic periodicals appeared all over the Internet and received a large amount of popular media coverage and attention as the trend of the moment. The Web created opportunities for this new genre of specialized online news and information in the mid and late 1990s and it has continued with a steady niche audience appeal (Rauch, 2002).

Slate (http://www.slate.com), Microsoft's 1996 entry into this type of digital periodical, is a more general interest in the content. It offers articles about politics, current events, and popular U.S. culture. *Salon* (http://www.salon.com) is another Web-based digital zine example. The reputations and credibility of these publications will vary, and writers must check each as they would check a traditional publication before developing a professional relationship.

E-mail newsletters take advantage of the number of individuals with one or more e-mail addresses. Most people have at least one. Specialized newsletter publishers have chosen to use the Internet and e-mail to distribute their content. Some are newsy, informational, and highly local or regional in nature, such as *Muse's News*, an e-zine and newsletter for songwriters, which offers advice and tips on fitness. Others focus on products and services offered by businesses. Some are organizational in nature, and designed for members of specific interest groups. Whatever the purpose and format of the newsletter, there are millions of copies distributed each year.

A fast-growing outlet for feature writers wishing to get their work published in some form for people to see and read is the blog. Blogs are personal forms of journalism that have skyrocketed in popularity in the past two decades. Blogs are digital journals or diaries in many ways, but they can become much more than that. Many writers take advantage of their interactive nature for feedback on their ideas and for discussions. Whatever their formal definitions evolve into, blogs are growing and can provide significant visibility for your work. They are easy enough to create (e.g., go to a Web site service provider such as Blogger, https://www.blogger.com, or WordPress, https://wordpress.com).

Writers, especially those just getting started, can use these inexpensive outlets to publish their work for others to see. Often, college classes even have blogs or Web

sites with blogs for student writing. More advanced professional writers have developed blogs into commercial ventures complete with advertising and sponsors and have thousands of regular readers. The growth of Web content has been staggering in the past two decades, of course, but the spurt in the number of blogs has equaled that level of expansion. There are millions of blogs worldwide (Stefanac, 2007). It seems a new blog is launched every second. Perhaps the biggest single challenge of writing feature content for blogs is to be consistent and develop the writing discipline to contribute to the blog on a weekly or even daily basis. For writing that includes reporting, such as many types of features require, regular contributions to a blog outlet require a strong commitment of time and energy to developing the new content. However, a blog makes perfect sense for a student journalist, for example, as a place to publish his or her work from writing and reporting classes and for student news media.

Newsletter Feature Writing

Despite a billion-dollar revenue stream and thousands of employees, newsletters have not always been given recognition in the publishing business (Nelson & Danis, 1995). The industry is quite fluid and ripe with opportunities. Some newsletters have grown larger than some newspapers and magazines in terms of circulation and staff size, although most are quite small. Newsletters are published for business and industry, for everyday life and home activities, in agriculture and life sciences, about community life, medicine and technology, the arts, languages, education, social sciences, and even world and international affairs. Few, if any, subjects are not covered by newsletter publications.

For students, if newsletters seem appealing, start with a campus organization with which you may be involved. Offer to write and produce the newsletter or, if there is not one, offer to start one. These can be free to distribute using e-mail and many universities provide software for it (e.g., Word and Adobe Acrobat) as well as server space for Web-based newsletters for students. These can be produced once a semester or monthly or even more often.

Organizations depend on newsletters to communicate with members. While many cut costs by sending them in electronic form by e-mail or e-mail attachments (e.g., pdf files or even Word files), many larger organizations opt to continue to print copies and make them available on Web sites. Thousands of newsletters serve their organizations and members and serve as useful professional outlets for feature writers and editors.

Newsletters mean new and growing markets for feature writers. Many newsletters are produced by comparatively small staff and need both talented staff writers and freelance writers. Just about everyone reads a newsletter of some sort on a regular basis. Some might even come to you, your business, or your family residence unsolicited. Newsletters are necessary because they, like newspapers and magazines, contain news and information. Newsletters are highly specialized, reflecting the interests of members of groups, clubs and organizations, institutions, and other entities that need to communicate information. Newsletters give members of organizations information and a sense of belonging.

Newsletters sell. They inform. They motivate. "Successful newsletters convey specialized information to narrow markets," wrote newsletter industry executive

Goss (1988, p. 1). "The public's demand for specialized information has made the growth of newsletters in the information industry phenomenal."

They come and go. A lot of new newsletters begin each year, but an equal number fail because of over-optimism; poor financing; weak reporting, writing, and editing; or all these factors. However, most newsletters have been in business for several years (Nelson & Danis, 1995). Nevertheless, newsletters today are, with their wide range of specialized subjects, perhaps the single-best potential markets for beginning feature writers. Not only are newsletters available in traditional 8½-inch by 11-inch paper format, but also in digital media, such as the Web, HTML format e-mail messages, and pdf files.

"Newsletter jobs are not necessarily easier to find than jobs with other news media organizations. (Some newsletter publishers say they never hire people straight out of journalism school)," writes *Criminal Justice Newsletter* editor Craig Fischer (1990, p. 2). "Nevertheless, J-school grads should be aware that newsletters can offer excellent opportunities to practice *bona-fide* journalism, using the same skills as those applied at a newspaper, magazine or wire service job" (Fischer, 1990, p. 2).

Some newsletters are only a few pages in length and are the effort of just one or two persons. In terms of format and content, most are published on 8½-inch by 11-inch pages and contain some sort of nameplate, general news and information, features, calendars, artwork, photographs, and columns, and editorials, and some even contain advertising. They may only be published on a quarterly or monthly basis. These small publications serve an important mass communication need in the contemporary world.

Other newsletters are much more substantial. They may have dozens of pages, be printed on glossy paper, offer two-color or even four-color commercial printing, and are distributed two or more times per month, perhaps even weekly. In addition to a publisher and editor, there may be news and feature writers on staff. These newsletters are commercial. They are magazine-like in their orientation, circulate more copies, and must make a profit for the publisher. In between, there is a wide range of forms and styles of newsletters.

But what exactly is a newsletter? Newsletters have several special characteristics, including publications that are serial in nature, are readily available to the public, have national or broad regional interests but often also have local or community focus, treat specialized interests and topics for readers, and use a variety of formal and informal presentations. Newsletters are an unequaled source of current but often highly specialized information; they meet the needs of today's fast-paced society by providing information quickly and in an easily digestible format. Although Webster's provides a concise definition of the term "newsletter," the word is used to describe publications of all kinds, ranging from scientific journals to occasional bulletins that carry commercial product notices. Conversely, publications that are arguably newsletters in format and content call themselves magazines, newspapers, or journals.

In a recent edition of *Newsletters in Print*, Amy Darga (2003) used these criteria for including a newsletter in the reference book:

- It is a serial publication in North America available to the public (private publications and house organs were excluded in the directory).
- It is of national or broad regional interest.

- It addresses specialized interests and topics and addresses itself to those who share the interest.
- It uses a variety of formats and presentation styles and typography.

The Specialized Information Publishers Association, formerly the Newsletter and Electronic Publishers Association (http://www.newsletters.org) and its associated Specialized Information Publishers Foundation (SIPF, both based in Vienna, VA, differentiate between house organ publications and subscription-based newsletters. SIPF (2008) says:

> A subscription newsletter is a specialized-information publication that is supported by subscription sales and (usually) does not contain advertising. Successful newsletters convey specialized information to narrow markets—information that isn't available in a daily newspaper or weekly magazine, for instance. There are two distinct types of newsletters. Business-to-business newsletters are written for and paid by a business. A business newsletter specializes in narrow, niche subjects of interest to a limited number of people. It may pertain to a particular industry or government agency, or to a type of government or business function that crosses industry lines … . In contrast, consumer newsletters are paid for by an individual.
>
> (Specialized Information Publishers Foundation, 2008, p. 1)

Consumer newsletters are more general, focus on topics such as investment advice, health, and travel, and generally have a larger audience (Specialized Information Publishers Foundation, 2008, p. 2). Subscription newsletters are nearly a century old. The oldest is *The Kiplinger Tax Letter*, which began in 1925 and is aimed at tax professionals and sophisticated taxpayers. There are several such publications more than a half-century old (Wysocki, 1999). Newsletters such as these begin where an informational gap exists. Someone identifies it and the new publication is launched. The beat can be relatively broad in the beginning but will eventually develop into related or spinoff publications that give more information about subdivisions of the topic.

Newsletter writers are often freelance contributors or staff writers doubling as editors. Most newsletter publishers cannot afford a large full-time staff. Instead, publishers and editors purchase articles or take contributed articles for free from interested people. These outlets, even the ones that cannot pay contributors, can be important starting points for feature writers. Newsletters that succeed are a mix of mostly traditional hard news peppered with features, profiles, humor, and the human element.

A clear advantage is that writers are often working with small organizations and with editors directly. Access is often faster and easier. Opportunities may be greater because they are less competitive than on newspapers and magazines. However, there is a trade-off. Although there may be less competition, newsletters are highly specialized and require feature writers who have the ability to work within the specialization and communicate at the level of the often-sophisticated audience seeking high-level news and features.

Internal newsletters for companies and other types of organizations contain stories that inform and build loyalty to the organization. They can unify readers through the

features on employees or members. The news and information keep everyone up to date sometimes with daily e-mail newsletters. External newsletters are often used for sales and publicity purposes to very different audiences. News and feature stories serve customers, potential customers, supporters, and members, and tell them about developments such as new products or services. These are often produced by writers working for company public relations departments.

In essence, the types and purposes of feature articles in newsletters may differ somewhat from newspaper and magazine features, but the writing forms and styles will probably not be too different. Commercial newsletters—those published with subscriber fees only—are, in a sense, the purest forms of journalism. There are no advertising and often no organizational interests to represent or promote. These newsletters are quite expensive but equally valuable to their subscribers. Anyone willing to spend up to $5,000 per year to subscribe to a particular newsletter demands rare information that cannot be obtained elsewhere, and this individual wants it without the sanitized editing that may occur at other publications.

"Newsletters provide more detail, more background, more analysis and more follow up to a story than is required by the average newspaper or magazine reader," offers SPIA in its career guide (Specialized Information Publishers Foundation, 2008, p. 5).

The information they offer is very specific. Subscription newsletters provide specialized and focused information that subscribers rarely find in other resources. Some newsletters are considered key or leading sources of their industries and they are regularly read by professionals in the field.

Individuals writing feature articles for newsletters work under a wide range of circumstances, but the model is much more like that of magazines than of newspapers. Newsletters rarely have full-time staff writers and depend a great deal on freelancers or part-time contributors. Larger, well-established newsletters may have small staff, but these writers probably also have other responsibilities such as editing or other work for the organization the newsletter serves.

Most newsletters, even expensive ones with significant national or international circulation, have small full-time staff and seek much of their material from outside contributors. Organizations that publish newsletters—companies, associations, country clubs, schools, government departments and agencies, neighborhood groups, and even extended families—may have a single editor who depends on a stable of contributors who have information of interest to readers. This approach to publishing newsletters opens opportunities for beginning and experienced freelance writers, of course.

Full-time journalists working for newsletters are reporters and feature writers just like those at newspapers and magazines. Their audiences may be much more sophisticated and specialized, but they use the same tools and techniques. Newsletter journalists may also be more expert on the subjects they cover. The SIPF (2008) noted the following:

> Newsletter journalists cover the same press conferences, congressional hearings, court proceedings, and other events as their colleagues from mass-audience publications. In fact, newsletter journalists often outnumber the other at such events. In Washington, political and other policy newsletter journalists have the

> same congressional and White House credentials as those worn by reporters for other types of periodicals.
>
> (Specialized Information Publishers Foundation, 2008, p. 5)

On the other hand, newsletter feature writers can be, and often are, members of special groups publishing the newsletters. Or they are individuals with a particular specialization or interest. Assignments are obtained by contacting editors and either asking for assignments or proposing article ideas. Much of the time there will be less competition and easier access to editors of these publications. This means it may be easiest for beginners to try writing features for newsletters, rather than newspapers and magazines.

It is also important to note that because of the more independent nature of newsletter reporting and feature writing, there is more flexibility for individual lifestyles. Many writers work out of offices in their homes, using personal computers, modems, fax machines, and overnight mail services. Pay may be per story or per issue, but the additional freedom is worth it for many individuals.

Advancement is also rapid for some persons. A writer may find himself or herself promoted to an assistant editor, associate editor, or editor-in-chief. Or with experience, you may start your own publication and serve as a writer and editor. It is clear, regardless of the level of work, that opportunities are present in this news and features medium as never before.

Today's Markets for Features

Markets for feature article writers offer many opportunities for good freelancers. Social media present new and growing avenues for publication. Magazines are increasing in number and so are the markets. Although there are fewer daily and weekly newspapers than in past years, newspapers emphasize their feature material even more to compete with other soft news sources such as television, radio, and magazines as an information and entertainment source.

Although you might not think much about it, smaller newspapers are the best chance for a beginning writer to find markets for feature articles. The problem is that there are fewer of them today. Some have taken the form of local news Web sites and need contributors. These small dailies that do not have large staffs are often responsive to queries or completed manuscripts for timely features. Weekly newspapers, with even smaller staffs, often seek assistance when it does not come to the editor. It is likely that your own journalism school or campus placement service receives telephone calls from time to time from weekly editors seeking part-time or freelance help in covering their neighborhood or community.

Magazines follow the same general model of opportunity for writers. Although most magazines seek good writers outside their staff, many small and specialized publications need quality freelance assistance year-round. This demands that you know significant amounts about the subjects which you write about in a specialized magazine.

Online opportunities are growing and require the same effort to find them and take advantage of them as any opportunities for traditional newspapers, magazines, or newsletters. To be paid to write for a Web site, social media site page, or a blog with

professionally produced news content will likely require feature writing skills, but also expect writers to offer some multimedia skills for the production of photographs, video, and audio content as well.

A beginning feature writer needs only look at the latest edition of the Editor & Publisher searchable online newspaper database to find out which newspapers are published in his or her region or area. Similarly, the annual edition of *Writer's Market,* published each fall, gives a complete look at the magazine markets that buy freelance feature work. The same company produces annual market reference books for other writers, including fiction. And, of course, it goes without lengthy explanation that you can simply search Google or another search engine for specific cities or states, to see which publishers maintain offices in your community (e.g., a search for "Ohio newspapers").

Various specialized subjects have increased their visibility in the past decade. The growing number of separate and larger business sections in newspapers and business magazines means new and more writing opportunities as well. As the Business Press Educational Foundation (n.d.) says, business stories focus on supercomputers, genetic engineering, manufacturing in space, and other unlikely business topics because these activities are financed by businesses and are the work of privately funded laboratories of corporations, not the federal, state, or local governments: "The results [of these stories in the business press], moreover, promise to have a major impact on existing industries and, perhaps, bring entire new industries into existence. It explains why these developments are getting even more diligent attention from the business/industry press than from the mass media," the group stated (Business Press Educational Foundation, n.d., p. 1).

There are more than 3,000 business publications in the United States alone, presenting a growing market for writers. There are other examples. You could make similar points about the growth in sports publications, new tech publications, and lifestyle/living publications. These changes, of course, mean better opportunities for feature writers at present and in the future. And, for the beginning feature writer, these publications are probably more accessible than established consumer magazines or daily newspapers.

There are many excellent approaches to feature writing that you will discover. Certain specific features and subjects that are getting inadequate attention or no attention might draw greater readership. Some publications are reexamining how they define and present news has given dramatically changing markets and readers. Modern readership research has given editors and publishers new insights into more effective ways to serve readers. Features are one of the approaches. Magazines have always had high, if not dominant, feature content, but they are learning new ways to use and present features on new platforms such as social media. Newspapers are becoming more magazine-like in their use of features and are mastering new platforms for their original work.

Chapter 3

Finding Good Feature Ideas

Ernesto Londoño is a *New York Times* National staff correspondent based in Minneapolis-St. Paul. He is part of the Midwest team, which covers 11 states and his work often focuses on drug use and counternarcotics policy in America. He was the newspaper's Brazil bureau chief from 2017 to early 2022, covering Brazil and four other countries in the southern cone of South America. Prior to that he served on the newspaper's editorial board, focusing on international issues.

Before joining *The Times*, he worked at *The Washington Post*, where he covered the Pentagon and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. When he was in reporting from Iraq, he basically worked in a restricted compound for safety reasons. He could not get outside it to pursue news and feature stories as easily as he would like. Security was far too strict and conditions where he worked were dangerous at times. Because of the circumstances of his bureau's location and the war surrounding him, his reporting and story-writing opportunities were often limited by safety and access issues. But he still wrote regularly about the U.S. troops and other events in Iraq. In his second assignment in Iraq, the journalist, who joined *The Post* after working as a city desk reporter for the *Dallas Morning News*, tried to use feature stories to balance the breaking news he was expected to provide readers.

"Although what we do there fits the traditional hard news mold 9 times out of 10, some of the most compelling and well-read stories we do are strong narratives," Londoño said when worked in Baghdad. "Those are typically the stories that really resonate with readers the most. They're not always easy to pull off in a war zone, given the crush of news, but we've done plenty" (Personal communication to author, September 6, 2008).

Born and raised in Bogotá, Colombia, Londoño earned his bachelor's degree in journalism and Latin American studies at the University of Miami in 2003. After finishing his degree, he interned at *The Post* and was given his first reporting opportunity at *The Dallas Morning News*. He joined *The Post* as a staff writer about two years later.

"I covered criminal justice in suburban Maryland for nearly three years before getting a job on the foreign desk, based in Baghdad," he explained. "I'm one of three *Post* staff writers in the Baghdad bureau. We have a large Iraqi staff that includes six reporters/interpreters and a handful of stringers in key provinces. We cover daily and breaking news and report and write feature stories. The latter is always challenging in Iraq, a fast-paced, dangerous, and unpredictable place. It has become harder because

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we are increasingly asked to file stories for the website and for the *Financial Times*, which have earlier deadlines.

"Our information comes from a variety of sources. We communicate daily with U.S. diplomats, the American military, and Iraqi officials. We stay on top of the basics by reviewing press releases, checking the wires, making beat calls, and monitoring the Iraqi press. But the best stories and scoops generally come from sources we've worked hard to cultivate. Most of our ideas for feature and other big-picture, enterprise stories originate in the bureau, but a few are conceived by editors in Washington. Our local staff is the best starting point. Our drivers, bodyguards and translators know Iraq far better than we ever will. And they often come to us with fascinating yarns."

Londoño likes to write human interest features because he knows they are widely read. These stories are centered on the human side of war and focus on individuals or small groups of individuals.

"I find that stories about people— be it Iraqis or U.S. soldiers— are the ones that resonate most with readers. It's hard to make a story about a car bomb compelling after six years of war. So, we seek to take readers behind the scenes through the eyes of the people we meet. We like to tell them what war sounds like, feels like, looks like; how it changes lives, families, and neighborhoods. There are no shortcuts. Good journalism requires getting to the right place at the right time and spending as much time as you can there. It requires knowing when to ask questions and when to stand by, listen and observe."

While in Iraq, Londoño wrote a feature about soldiering in Iraq by focusing on a single man and his experiences. This is how it began:

> *MOSUL, Iraq— An hour before sunrise, under a star-studded sky, 1st Lt. Michael Baxter's soldiers packed their gear into Bradley Fighting Vehicles, heading out to patrol neighborhoods where fighting insurgents often seems like warring with shadows.*
>
> *Soldiers took long drags on cigarettes before strapping 40 pounds of armor and gear onto their backs, saying little save for quick back-and-forth on radios. They crammed into the cabins of the tracked, armored vehicles that rattle like flimsy wooden roller-coaster cars and tuned out the sights and sounds of the city.*
>
> *Mosul, a city in northern Iraq that straddles the Tigris River, has long been a stronghold of Sunni insurgents. When U.S. and Iraqi security forces aggressively fought Sunni extremists in Baghdad and other provinces, insurgents flocked to Mosul in recent months.*
>
> *The patrols took place on the eve of an offensive against the insurgents that Iraqi officials had vowed to undertake here. The offensive has been dubbed Lion's Roar, and it may cast a spotlight on the readiness and competence of the Iraqi military and police in northern Iraq.*
>
> *"This is their operation," said Maj. Amanda Emmens-Rossi, a U.S. military spokeswoman in Mosul. "It was conceived and led by the Iraqi military."*
>
> *U.S. military officials say an offensive here is unlikely to unfold like the 2004 battle of Fallujah, in which U.S. troops fought entrenched insurgent cells with*

> *considerable success. And the battle in Mosul is considerably different from recent fights in Baghdad and Basra.*
>
> *"This is not a Fallujah," said Lt. Col. Christopher Johnson, commander of the 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment, which is deployed in eastern Mosul. Gathering intelligence on insurgent networks has been daunting, and insurgents have seldom fought security forces face to face. "They pick the time and place" … .*
>
> (Londoño, 2008, p. A07)

"This story provided a compelling glimpse of what it's like to be a soldier in Iraq now that there's little face-to-face combat. Many soldiers have been here [Iraq] for three or four rotations. They have a hard, scary, and frustrating job," Londoño explained. "The best material for this story did not come from interviews. I got it by listening and observing—being a fly on the wall. That's the key to reporting solid features" (Personal communication to author, September 28, 2008).

There will be days when a good story idea comes to you easily, as they often did for Londoño in a very dangerous war zone, but there will be other days when an idea will be difficult to generate. Often, writers must develop workable ideas from circumstances, conditions, and surroundings that are important to their publication's readers.

Travel has been one of the industries seriously affected by sharp increases in oil and other fuel costs, military conflict, and the global COVID-19 pandemic. All aspects of the travel industry have been impacted, from airlines to ships to buses, trains, and even personal automobiles. While gasoline, diesel, jet fuel, and other petrol prices went up, so did ticket prices and fill-ups at local gas station pumps. In 2022, for example, the U.S. and much of the world experienced record-high oil and gasoline prices. The travel industry and travelers were severely impacted in 2021 and 2022 especially. Fares jumped to new levels and some routes, both international and regional, were eliminated. Rules and policies were changed for public health reasons, making international travel difficult if not impossible. Changes came to a huge global industry in the face of a changing world economy. Priorities for travel were upended. Travel magazines such as *Travel & Leisure* and *Condé Nast Traveler* published numerous articles about the new conditions and changes for readers, but others were forced to stop publication.

Newspapers with travel and business sections did much the same. The popular Sunday Travel section of *The New York Times* ceased print publication during the pandemic but remained online. Travel was equally difficult during the recession of 2007–09 and conditions led to features about traveler experiences. In one example from *The Washington Post*, writer Sholnn Freeman (2008) prepared a news feature for the newspaper's Financial section that told of travelers who were so frustrated that they were taking trains along the U.S. East Coast instead of flying. Using one traveler as an example, Freeman wrote:

> *Jada Golden stood in the waiting lounge at Union Station, explaining why Amtrak is a better way to travel than an airline.*
>
> *"It's as heavy as we want," Golden said, pointing to an oversize suitcase. "We can put it on a rack in the rail car and get things out of it."*

> *Golden, 36 and a Boston schoolteacher, pointed to another bag – a large paper grocery bag filled with sandwiches, salads, water and fruit. "You can bring food," she said.*
>
> *She continued. On the train, she's free to pick her own seat and doesn't have a flight attendant telling her when to use electronics. And then there's the airline stress factor – the security headaches and the delays.*
>
> *"You're always delayed in the airport," Golden said. "You always have connecting flights."*
>
> *With delays, airport congestion and sky-high jet fuel prices draining the romance and convenience of air travel, Americans have increasingly turned to Amtrak for summer travel.*
>
> (Freeman, 2008, p. D01)

The story then describes how people, such as this woman, were changing their travel habits. The story is built around traveler anecdotes and, of course, some national Amtrak passenger statistics. Many story ideas such as this one can turn around rather rapidly and still illustrate trends or broader social or economic matters. However, the process of finding and developing feature story ideas can require patience and organization. It can also require a little serendipity or even luck.

Getting Started

Do you notice the ordinary and extraordinary things around you? When you drive or take the train or even walk to work or to school, do you make the extra effort to notice people or places or what is happening during that routine trip? Do you take time to look around when you go someplace new? What do you see? Is it interesting to you? Would it be interesting to others? Do you ever think of these observations as ideas for your writing? If you don't do this, you likely spend too much time looking at your phone or computer screen. Many people do. But a smart writer will look around when out.

Have you met anyone new today? What does that person do for a living? Has your regular network of friends and acquaintances brought anything different or unique into your life recently? What did you do out of the ordinary this week? Was it fun? Was it informative? Was it significant? Did you learn anything from the experience? Would anyone else be interested?

Any of these questions, if answered in the affirmative, might lead to a very good feature story. Don't take seemingly ordinary events for granted as a feature writer. Finding feature ideas can be that easy. Some subjects practically announce their potential as a story to an alert writer. Others need the experienced eye and ear of a feature writer to work them into readable and salable stories.

Liz Balmaseda, former columnist and feature writer for the *Miami Herald* who won the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for commentary, said the entire city is what gives her ideas. Paying close attention to what is going on around her is one of the major ways in which she finds stories. "I look around and see what's going on," Balmaseda explained. "I talk to a lot of people and ask them to tell me what's going on where they work and where they live."

Balmaseda also said she also depends on people to call her with column and feature story ideas. As a highly visible columnist for one of the nation's major daily newspapers, she received large numbers of telephone calls and letters. "People will call me and give me ideas," she said. "And I also talk to people in the newsroom. Reporters around the newsroom are crucial teammates for me. With their help, I look for wrongs—people who have been wronged" (Personal communication to author, June 6, 1993).

Feature writers must notice the details of things around them. You probably will not have such unusual experiences as Mt. Everest or Antarctic expeditions on which to base your features. But stories can come from the ordinary, or the seemingly ordinary. If you drive the same road to work or school every day, try to vary the route. Look at the scenery with an eye for story possibilities. For example, if you drive past the same house every day, look in the driveway. That old car that the owner of the house is restoring might be more than what it appears. Is there a chance this person restores valuable older cars? Collectibles? Or that it was once owned by a celebrity? Isn't this a story prospect? Why not stop and ask a few questions?

Writer Margaret Davidson believes being a keen observer is what makes the biggest difference between a good writer and an average one, especially in terms of finding news and story ideas. "A good writer is a good observer—of people, surroundings, ideas and trends, and the general flotsam and jetsam of the world around," Davidson explained. "Some people seem to go through life with blinders on. They are so wrapped up in their own comings and goings they are unaware of the ebb and flow around them. But others observe the world in sharp detail with the vision to see everything in perspective, appreciating its true value" (Davidson, 1990, p. 7). Davidson also says this is especially true of college students. "For some of the students—the world seems to be a colorful and fascinating place with an endless supply of worthwhile news stories. But for many others it appears to be very a sterile, boring existence where little that is exciting ever happens" (p. 7). If you go somewhere new, think even before you leave home about what possibilities for stories and articles exist. If you like the destination, why? Would others like it also? If that new boutique has unusual or new designs, tell others about it—in a feature story.

Meeting someone new from a different country can be exciting, also. However, don't think about the new acquaintance from a personal perspective. Think about him or her from a writer's point of view. Is this person doing something worthy of a feature story? What might make him or her interesting to readers? What has this person done that others would like to know? Perhaps the person is in town for just a few days and lives in a distant foreign country—perhaps a relatively unknown small country in Africa or Asia. Wouldn't this be a chance to write about the person, the country, its culture and all the unusual aspects of life in a country that many Americans do not know much about? Numerous feature stories like this emerged in 2022 when refugees from the war in Ukraine began to arrive in other parts of Europe and the U.S.

Finding story ideas is related to our natural curiosity. Often, the best ideas occur when writers sometimes think like three- or four-year-olds, who are always asking "why?" and "how?" And you must think about what you do each day—you did something unusual, even something as simple as deciding where to go for spring

break or over a long weekend. You could write a story listing your own favorite places. Or compile a list from the information provided by tourism and visitors bureaus. Those might just make a good feature story.

Identifying Potential Feature Material

What makes a great feature article idea—an idea that gets published? Just about everything around you is possible feature material. Use your senses. Look around. Absorb. Notice. Listen. Look. Your job is to take these undeveloped ideas and turn them into something interesting for readers. People can be the source and subject of some of the best story ideas. Often a powerful story about a successful person's problems helps readers to see the "real" side of that individual. We learn from how he or she has experienced adversity and overcome it, or made the comeback to succeed a second time, lost a loved one, or survived a brush with death. These stories often make wonderful feature articles.

Williamson (1975) says finding a feature story idea should be easy. Those stories seem to jump out and practically scream, "Write me!" Williamson argued, "A great advantage in being a reporter is that you have a 'license' to find out about all those things you've always been curious about" (p. 70).

The New York Times reporter and national columnist Dan Barry found an innovative and appealing approach to the national story about easy mortgages, unpaid loans, and foreclosed homes when he visited Fort Myers, on the Gulf Coast of Florida. But instead of simply talking to bankers, regulators, homeowners, victims of foreclosure, and residents in neighborhoods affected by the problem, he found a fresh approach. Barry, the author of five books, found the one man in Fort Myers, a medium-sized city in Southwest Florida, who worked for the city and is responsible for mowing the lawns and boarding up the abandoned homes. It was a unique perspective that told a different story than the countless features published during a period of financial crisis in the United States. Barry (2008, p. A16) opened his story this way:

> *FORT MYERS, Fla. – The lawn mower's whine disrupts the morning peace of Coconut Drive like an alarm clock no one remembers setting. It rises and falls and rises again, as the angry machine cuts across the front-lawn jungle of an attractive house with great location and move-in potential.*
>
> *Abandoned, in other words. Three years ago, sold for $660,000; today, a ghostly parcel of failure.*

Barry continued to tell the story of Shayne Becher, 39, who works for the city code enforcement office. He spends his days cutting grass and hammering sheets of plywood onto exterior walls. Barry's "nut graf"—the paragraph that tells readers why the story needs to be read—explains the big picture:

> *"Beautiful," he says. Then he drives a few blocks to another site of abandonment, on Sunset Place.*
>
> *Come to Fort Myers, population 60,000, the seat of Lee County. Walk the Gulf Coast beaches. Cruise the Caloosahatchee River. Witness what happens when*

> *banks dole out easy mortgages and homeowners forget that the money isn't free. Drive down McGregor Boulevard, or Cleveland Avenue, turn left or turn right, and see the empty houses, the overgrown lots, the signs saying AUCTION and FREE RENT.*
>
> (Barry, 2008, p. A16)

The story, published as part of the newspaper's National Report, paints a grim picture that illustrates the desperation and suffering of homeowners during a recession, but also the problems they leave behind for the neighbors and the cities that must care for abandoned properties.

The key to a successful story such as this one by Dan Barry is curiosity. Be curious about who takes care of the homes when they are left empty. Maybe you have not dealt with mortgage issues, of course, but maybe you know someone who has experienced the problem. Let these casual observations turn into story prospects, especially if you see a unique angle such as the man solely responsible for city maintenance of abandoned homes. Once you notice things, hear about something appealing, once you meet someone, once you discover something interesting to you, let your journalistic curiosity take over. Satisfy your inquisitiveness by finding out about the subject. How? If you always wanted to learn about sailing, go to a marina to interview a local sailor or take lessons at a nearby lake, or go to a nearby sailing club meeting.

Finding the right story idea is also dependent on the publication for which you will write the story. You need to know what sort of material the publication publishes. This is more easily done if you work for the publication, but it can be relatively easy to find out if you take time to research the publication and its market (Bowman, 1997). You also need to know the basic characteristics of feature ideas. What are they? Traditionally, good feature ideas have eight basic elements, according to Clay Schoenfeld and Karen Diegmueller (1982). Those elements are as follows:

1 *Appeal to people* — The story must meet a need of the reader.
2 *Facts* — A feature that works will contain certain information, or facts, about that subject that will be beneficial to readers in some way.
3 *Personalities* — Facts are enhanced with personality. A story that can offer some unusual person or personality with facts and appeal will be much stronger.
4 *Angle* — The right "slant" or theme makes the subject tie together better.
5 *Action* — Can you make the story come alive? It will if you have some activity in the story. It is relatively simple — people should do something in your story.
6 *Uniqueness and universality* — The topic should be different and should have broad appeal at the same time.
7 *Significance* — Timeliness, proximity, prominence, and relevance create significance in a story.
8 *Energy increment* —The story should stir your readers just as the idea stirred you to write the story. You should show your enthusiasm and sincerity.

Finally, think about the necessity that all feature ideas remain fresh. Just like bread, a feature idea has a certain shelf life, and it is up to you as a writer to make certain the

idea is developed and published in story form while it is still fresh. The best idea won't work with editors or with readers if it is stale.

The Right Steps to Idea Success

Nonfiction and fiction writing have a lot of similarities, and many of them are discussed throughout this book. One similarity is the formation of ideas. Mystery novelist Elizabeth Peters (1992) says story ideas are quite different from the plots she uses in her books. She wrote the following:

> It [the idea] begins with a "one-liner"—a single sentence or visual image, characterized by brevity and vividness. Since an idea is not an avocado, you can't simply go out and get one. In fact, the technique of finding a usable idea is more akin to bird watching than to chasing butterflies: There are ideas all over the place; the trick is to recognize one of the elusive creatures when it flits past. I'm not being whimsical. It is certainly possible to search actively for an idea, but unless you know one when you see one, there is no point in looking. (p. 88)

Shaping Your Story Ideas

Freelance writer Lorene Hanley Duquin (1987) has a four-step plan of attack for shaping story ideas before sitting down to write the story. She says these steps require "simple brainstorming" by asking yourself the questions and writing down the answers. "It's that information that I mold and shape into a proposal that captures an editor's interest and imagination" (p. 38). Her steps are as follows:

1 *Capture* — Build an idea file because writers cannot always use ideas when they come along. You can do this with notebooks, file cards, file folders, shoeboxes, and even your word processor. At times, ideas must wait until a market prospect presents itself, too.
2 *Develop* — Do some preliminary research to develop that idea into a proposal. Not all ideas are easy to develop, of course, so be prepared to do some work. Think about the idea. Is it too broad or too narrow? Does it have wide enough appeal to your potential readers?
3 *Tailor* — Shaping the idea to the readers you wish to reach is very important to a successful feature story. Ask yourself questions: What readers will be interested in your article? What has already been done on the subject? What publication will want to publish the article?
4 *Test* — Duquin says you should be able to answer these questions: Do you really want to write the article? Are you capable of doing the article? How much will the article cost you (in money and time)? What else can you do with the material if an editor does not want it? Are there markets for reprints? Can you do spinoff articles?

For another approach to turning an idea into a workable story, writer Marshall Cook (1986) suggested seven steps:

1 *Feed the mind* — Try new experiences. Relive old ones through journals and diaries. Read extensively. Talk to people. Do stimulating things.
2 *Nurture the idea* — Ideas come with a flash of lightning or with the graduate speed of a sunrise. Be ready for an idea to come to you and give it your attention by examining it from all angles.
3 *Ignore the idea* — After pampering the idea, forget about it for a while. This incubation period helps divert you from the pressure of creation on demand. Decide to come back to the idea at an appointed date and time a few days later.
4 *Welcome the idea back* — When you return to the idea at the appointed hour, be fresh and alert. Be at your most productive period of the day. Write in your regular, yet special, writing place. Be comfortable.
5 *Create* — Concentrate on your idea, organize, and get going. Let the ideas flow and worry about style and clarity later. Get something on paper now.
6 *Sustain the flow* — Regular writing momentum makes a big difference. Successfully developing your idea into an article will depend on the continuation of the work.
7 *Revise* — This involves polishing the original draft into a final product.

Looking at the World

You can do stories on an endless list of topics. Start by thinking about your own personal experiences and lifestyle. Stop reading for a moment. Open a new Word or Excel file and make a list of possible story ideas. Or use the Notes app on your iPhone. Your list can be very general. You can refine it later. Compile the list before you read the next paragraph. Done? Compare your list to the idea categories that follow. If you are a typical college student, it might include such things as music, movies, dancing, fashion and clothing styles, housing, food, relationships, cars, dating and sex, classes, fraternities and sororities, grades, fitness, wellness, exercise, sport, travel, shopping, managing credit cards and bank accounts, friends, roommates, church, professional clubs and other social groups, part-time jobs, parents–grandparents, hometowns, and even politics. Whew. The list can be quite long.

Your list probably includes something like these and perhaps more. Your list might be more specific. Not bad for just a few minutes of "brainstorming." Each one of these categories can be divided into more specific subsets and then into story prospects. You just need to get more precise, that is, give each idea a little more focus. You might not realize it, but you are already an expert on many subjects that you live in every day, and you should write about them. If you are interested in fitness and exercise, for instance, do you like to jog? Do you take an aerobics class? If you do, you know more about jogging or aerobics than those persons who do not jog or do aerobics. You've experienced shopping for running and exercise clothes, conditioning, consuming the right foods, and the choice of best places to run, best clubs, and trainers. Now, do some reporting and write the story.

Unique personal expertise can be unique personal experience also. These can develop into wonderful feature articles for the right publications. How about those

categories we labeled parents-grandparents and hometown? Ambitious writers can turn an ordinary aspect of their lives, such as their multigenerational family or the home in which they grew up, into a marvelous new experience for readers. Suddenly an ordinary part of your unique life, if reimagined, becomes a feature idea, a story prospect, and ultimately a completed article.

Your story ideas should come from a lot of different places. For example, think of your experiences beyond the most immediate personal levels of your life. Professional and personal connections can be useful, too. Do you belong to a club or business group, or does someone in your family? Sometimes these organizations provide numerous professional and personal contacts that can be used as sources for story ideas or for stories themselves. The campus wellness center or the neighborhood fitness and exercise club to which you belong, for example, can become a source spot for stories.

You can write how-to-do-it stories, for example, from what you learn about the aerobics classes and other features about fitness, healthy eating habits, exercise clothing, membership plans and costs, workout protection and safety in times of pandemics, and so forth, about the clubs in your community.

Freelance writer Patricia L. Fry (1997) recommended being prepared for ideas to come at any time. To do this, she is never unprepared to take notes of her observations. "Carry a note pad or tape recorder wherever you go. Start an idea file to keep your notes in, as well as newspaper and magazine clippings. Do this faithfully and you'll always find some fresh ideas to pitch to editors," Fry (1997, p. 40) explained.

Certainly, community groups will often host programs with instructional and educational value. See what is happening at community centers and local branch libraries. Speeches and discussions can produce dozens of potential stories, ranging from childcare to income tax preparation to cooking. All you need to do is to look through the online listings of organizations on campus or in your community for upcoming events that could lead to interesting stories. Think about the subject, not the event itself. The speech or panel discussion might not become a story through the event itself. A speech or panel discussion about the #MeToo movement and sexual harassment in the workplace could lead to a feature article about the unique problems women face in their workplaces. And that speaker could become a major source for your story about how women should handle such problems and their courses of internal policy and legal action.

Conferences and conventions are still another area that might suggest stories for feature writers. National and regional meetings always attract the most active and authoritative persons who are interested in discussing recent developments in their respective specializations. If you are in a metropolitan area or resort region with large meeting space where conferences are frequently held, this source can be very valuable. To keep up with the schedule of conventions, simply make regular contact with your local convention and visitors' office or major convention hotels. Remember that most of these events will require some sort of credentials through the organization's offices for access.

Another set of sources is local libraries. Most communities have a public library. A few minutes spent in browsing through periodicals or new books at the library informs you about the latest treatments of subjects that may interest readers. Larger libraries, such as those at universities and colleges or those in metropolitan areas,

often offer exhibitions and programs with speakers such as authors and other experts who might provide material for potential stories. Some larger, more active, bookstores have similar programs.

If your community has a museum, the exhibits and specialists assembled may be useful for story ideas. Both permanent and temporary exhibits offer possibilities for stories, of course, even if the stories are limited to just the fact that these events are occurring. Often, you can go beyond the exhibit itself to generate stories about the artist or event being highlighted. Numerous local, regional, and national markets exist for these stories. In most areas, local history makes good feature material. This can be a subject area to cultivate for stories, especially if you can find a local historian who is also a good storyteller. Many of your readers will be interested in their community's history, especially if you can explain how and why events, buildings or other landmarks, and people, wound up as they did. We often see these stories published on event anniversaries or public holidays.

Because house and home are important to just about everyone, writing about these topics is a natural. Numerous "shelter" magazines, such as *Better Homes & Gardens* and *Architectural Digest*, exist on the subject. Major newspapers publish home and garden sections or pages on weekends or during certain seasons of the year.

Just roaming around can generate ideas for stories, too, if you know a good idea when you see it. When was the last time you drove through a neighborhood of your community that you haven't seen for a few months? Or maybe there are parts of your community that you have never visited. The curiosity and inquisitiveness of a good feature writer should motivate you to look at different places and people. In other words, explore and look around.

College Campuses as Sources for Ideas

Where do we get a good feature idea? Everywhere. Well, it seems like it. For starters, people studying and working at colleges or universities can be very good sources. Campuses offer both diversity and expertise. Combine that with relatively easy access and a campus is hard to beat for generating story ideas. If you are a student, think about the story prospects in your different classes. What interesting research is underway in the sciences on your campus? What projects and research are your own professors doing? Have you ever thought to ask? Many are working on serious and important research or creative projects that are often worthy of a feature or news story. Your creative writing professor in the English Department might be writing a new novel or collection of short stories. If your campus has a medical school, nursing school, healthcare management, or other health programs, you have many interesting story prospects there. Most medical schools, for example, have their own public relations offices to assist writers, too. The research and clinical work being done in these schools involves human health and human life. Even if you are no longer a student, you will find that colleges and universities can be rich with story possibilities. You just need to inquire.

Many universities and colleges have central public affairs or public relations offices that can suggest contacts for you on specific subjects. It is their role to promote what the school's faculty and staff are doing. With a telephone call, these persons can suggest story ideas to you based on their knowledge of the current research and

service projects on their campus. Some schools publish online expert directories that are excellent sources for reporters and writers. Organized by topic, these directories quickly tell you which experts exist in your own backyard, nationally, and even internationally. These are mostly free to use on college and university Web sites.

Marshall Swanson (1979), a senior writer for the University of South Carolina Magazine Group based in Columbia, uses his school's campuses for his feature articles. He suggested these five steps in tracking story ideas:

1 *Get to know how things run on campus* — Use the public relations people. Get maps and student-staff-faculty telephone directories of large campuses.
2 *Subscribe to the student newspaper* — Often these publications tell you a great deal about campus goings-on. You can extend this suggestion by reading the campus magazines and faculty–staff publications, also.
3 *Get to know the director of the student center* — There are many campus events that are coordinated through this office.
4 Establish contact with various deans and chairpersons — Do this in person if possible.
5 *Visit the campus research office* — Many universities have central offices for funded research programs, and a campus clearinghouse for funded research. There is often a list produced of this work, or of grants received, that might propose interesting ideas before anyone else gets them.

Swanson also suggested that people on campuses are good prospects for profiles. Both faculty members and students can become story ideas if you ask around to find out who is doing what. Columnist Dennis Hensley (1979) offered the following: "Colleges are the homes of the greatest minds we have in this country and the freelance writer who doesn't tap this source of free information is literally missing the buck—the royalty buck, that is" (p. 34).

Listening to Readers

Many times, readers suggest story ideas. You know you have become established as a writer when readers contact you to pass along their ideas for stories. Most writers publish stories in print and online with their Twitter hashtag (or other social media) address, their e-mail address, or other contact information. It is much easier for readers to interact with writers today than it has ever been.

Although some ideas will not be worthy of a story or are just not practical given your time or resources, others will be workable, and you should follow up. Never ignore tips from readers. If one tip just will not work, the next one might be ideal. You cannot afford to forget about these suggestions. If you cannot follow up on a tip right away, pass it along to someone who can or, if time permits, save it in your idea file for later. But you must take the time to check out each tip. Most reader ideas come in the form of casual conversations.

There are times when someone tries to be a public relations person for a friend or relative and write some sort of announcement or article to start you on your way. If you get an e-mail, social media message, even a phone call, or maybe someone pulls you aside on the street, listen to the idea even if you are busy and cannot do anything

about it right away. Write that idea down for action later. Marshall Cook (1986) suggested, "You [should] scramble for paper and pencil to capture this—You know better than to wait. Write it down now or risk remembering later only that you had a great idea but not what that great idea was." (p. 26)

Tips and other ideas for stories from readers need to be checked out. Occasionally, someone presents an idea to you that seems good, but it might be false, exaggerated, or otherwise problematic. You must take the time, at the outset, to confirm and verify the information before you dig in to begin work. The value of tips cannot be overlooked. Some feature writers make their living off of them.

Gary King, a Las Vegas freelance magazine crime writer and book author who specializes in serial true crime, finds tips to be his bread and butter. He combines tips with other sources, such as the news media and online computer databases. "At first, I got all of my leads for article ideas by following the news—all of it: TV, radio, newspapers, magazines. If I found a particular case that interested me, I would follow up by contacting (either in person, by phone, or by mail) the primary persons involved," King, the author of more than 500 true-crime magazine stories, explained (Personal communication to author, March 15, 1993).

"After a while, however, people began contacting me, particularly those in the law enforcement community whose trust and respect I managed to garner … . I learned about the power of the computer and now make scanning the news wires part of my daily routine. Nothing, however, can fully take the place of the in-person interview," King added.

Getting Ideas from Writers

There's absolutely nothing wrong with looking at what other writers and publications are publishing to help develop your own ideas. An idea that you see in a West Coast magazine or Web site might not work in an East Coast market, but then again, it could. You might be able to adapt it for your own purposes. Start by reading your local newspapers, magazines, online news sites, and relevant social media feeds. If you live in a metropolitan area, this might be a chore, but you must know what is happening locally. Look at other college news media Web sites, too. This keeps you informed about an idea's potential for publishing, but it also gives you ideas that you can market elsewhere.

Certainly, you should try to read as many out-of-town Web news sites, newspapers, magazines, and newsletters as you can. This is especially true to help you learn markets where you might sell your work, but also to give you new ideas. If your budget is tight and you cannot always buy subscriptions to newspapers, magazines, and other news media, then head to your local college or public library. You can find a lot online, of course, but most news Web sites limit access without a subscription.

Serious staff and freelance feature writers make this part of their daily work habits. "I find that a writer should read everything in order to get article leads. The *Wall Street Journal* is quite valuable to me for that reason. I often spend several hours a

week at the library going through newspapers," said retired Kansas freelance feature writer Susanna K. Hutcheson (Personal communication to author, April 3, 1993). Although she calls herself retired, the award-winning publisher, editor, and columnist continues to write humor and comedy. "Often, just a small item can be a major story or, at the least, a human-interest piece that can be resold a number of times," she said.

Using Specialized Publications, Programs

Specialized publications and programs take this concept one step further. Specialized magazines and journals are excellent sources for feature article ideas. If you write about a particular subject, whether it is gardening, cardiac care, office equipment, or restaurant food, you need to be in touch with the industries about which you write. The best way is to read about the concerns, news and developments, problems, opinions, services, lifestyles, and major issues in publications designed to be read by professionals, artists, and other experts. In the world of dental care, such magazines include *Dental Economics, Decisions in Dentistry, Dentistry Today, DentalReach, Dentistry IQ, and Dentaltown Magazine*. Each has a unique purpose and is aimed at people who work in the dental care industry, not patients. They discuss, among other things, patient treatment, office practices, innovations in technology, and practice management. These publications can help you understand the language, contemporary issues, and general concerns of these healthcare specialists, as well.

Although these sorts of specialized magazines are generally available to members of organizations or employees of companies clearly involved in an industry, nonmembers can sometimes obtain subscriptions or single copies. Or, of course, these can usually be obtained by borrowing them or requesting the discards from members or subscribers you know. But if you are serious about developing story ideas in a specialized area, you must have access to these publications while they are current.

Research journals are also good regular reading for story ideas. One of the most widely read is the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, which regularly publishes new medical research findings. It has been a major source for journalists writing about healthcare and policy during the global COVID-19 pandemic. The journal is a mainstay for health and medicine writers at any time and provides ideas for many general assignment reporters and freelance feature writers as well. Most scientific journals are published quarterly, but some are more frequent. Many have gone online in the past decade, also, making access to them much easier. You simply need to familiarize yourself with the existence of these publications by heading to a library or by asking sources you respect for the names of publications they regularly receive and read.

Bulletins are regularly issued specialty periodicals also. Bulletins and newsletters from organizations can be equally valuable for writers. Although these publications often do not offer the depth that a magazine or journal might offer, they still present issues that should suggest stories for you. Regular reading of these topics will make a difference in how you cover your subject.

With the uniqueness of online streaming and some cable television channels and networks, specialized television programs may be a useful source for story ideas also. Some specialty streaming services can offer more than just entertainment. Healthcare

is an example. With streaming content online, and with cable and satellite television systems growing to hundreds of channels, programs of narrow and specialized nature are getting opportunities to be aired. Talk radio, popular in many metropolitan markets, can generate odd and unusual ideas simply by listening to callers respond to the topic of the day. Shows devoted to local issues or specific concerns such as business or the economy are available and often become good sources for development of stories. Further, public access channels of cable systems provide relatively obscure groups with special interests the time to broadcast.

The convenience, for example, of tuning to your local school board meeting or local county government meeting on a cable channel or streaming it on a school district or government Web site saves time and allows you to monitor the concerns of the community.

Pitches from Public Relations Pros

Experienced journalists find that good story ideas can come from public relations professionals. While these individuals often have a tainted reputation among journalists and other writers because they unilaterally represent client interests, most public relations professionals work hard to represent their companies or clients in a fair manner and can provide journalists with strong story ideas and, most importantly, access to some of the most important information sources, such as the people and interests they represent, that are necessary for a story.

Try not to instantly discount the value of these story ideas, or "pitches" that originate with public relations professionals. Like tips for stories that are called in by readers or others, PR pitches can generate good story ideas. Weigh them and consider whether the idea works. But, like e-mail or voice mail messages, listen and judge each separately.

Ordinarily, public relations pitches come in the form of an e-mail press release or personal message, or a short telephone call summarizing the idea. You will be given contact information such as a name, phone number, Web site, and e-mail address if you decide to pursue the idea further and want to learn more before you decide to take substantial action on it. Press releases generated by a PR professional can also serve as an idea catalyst. These releases are presented in social media, e-mailed, published on Web sites, and distributed in a wide range of formats. Reporters and writers can also seek them out at a company or organization's Web site (usually listed under a "News" tab or a similar link) or on a national service Web site such as Cision's PR Newswire (http://www.prnewswire.com). For news emanating from many colleges and universities, its ProfNet (https://profnet.prnewswire.com/profnethome/what-is-profnet.aspx).

Pitches that come "cold," or from unfamiliar persons and organizations, are probably more difficult to judge and evaluate than those coming from known persons or organizations. Ideas must be checked out just like any other story possibility. Once you gain some experience and familiarity with certain organizations and their public relations representatives in a particular region or in a particular subject area, then a level of trust can develop, and it is easier to judge the quality of such pitches and whether these proposals will likely lead to some sort of feature story that will be

published. It is probably worth noting that these public relations pitches are generated for a reason. The representative wants to get his or her client publicity that you and your organization can provide. You, as a journalist, must decide whether the idea has merit--- that is, whether the idea contains any news value that will serve your readers.

Working with Editors

Editors know their markets well. Regardless of whether they are newspaper, magazine, online news, or newsletter editors, these persons are in contact with their readers and other writers, and they probably have had access to research about their publication's readership and reader demographics. You need to know as much as you can about a given news organization if you want to write freelance articles for it, and, of course, you need to know your readers and what they want to read if you are a staff member.

You will have regular opportunities to work with an editor on story ideas. Beginning general assignment staff writers at newspapers often start this way and gradually begin to initiate stories on their own as they gain confidence on the job. Magazine, online news, and newsletter staffers expect much the same, but because magazines, online news, and newsletters may often depend more on freelance material, editors usually only request articles or pass along ideas for articles to experienced writers whom they already know and trust.

Editors work from idea lists, just as you should. When something interests an editor, he or she usually puts it in some sort of holding spot until planning for a new edition or issue is underway. These idea lists, when stories are assigned or when they are finished, are often called "budgets." Like your own ideas, editors' article ideas come from an equally wide range of possible sources. Editors read extensively. They talk to people. They get tips. They observe in detail.

Your part of the system is to complete the field work. You research, report, and write. But you should not limit yourself to this role when working with an editor on a story idea. You bring into the situation different perspectives, experiences, and orientations. There will be occasions when you have begun to research an assignment and decide the original article idea was not exactly right. So, you refocus the story after discussing this with the editor who assigned the article. You should always share these concerns with your editor and offer to modify his or her suggestions if you have an angle that will make a good idea a better one.

Your editor should be willing to listen. Don't change the story without talking to an editor. The editor needs to know what you are doing because your article is just one part of a larger plan for the department, section, or even the entire publication.

On occasions, you will find a group brainstorming session can generate workable story ideas. You can do this with your supervising editors, with other writers, and even your friends or roommates. Simple conversation around the office or the apartment or dorm floor during a break or after work might do the trick. For freelancers not working in a news media environment, writers' clubs and other similar professional organizations can offer the same support.

An Editor's Idea Development Strategies

Rama Ramaswami, McKinsey Global Publishing

Award-winning magazine manager, editor, and freelance writer Rama Ramaswami works with both staff writers and freelance writers to develop story ideas. She is a senior editor for McKinsey Global Publishing, part of McKinsey & Co., an international media and consulting corporation reaching 67 nations and 133 cities. Based in New York City, she also works as a freelance writer from her home in Connecticut and has published work in *Forbes, Gartner, The Hindu Business Line, atmarkIT, THE Journal: Technological Horizons in Education, and Multichannel Merchant*. Ramaswami was, for many years, editor of *Operations & Fulfillment*, a monthly trade and industry magazine that merged with *Catalog Age* magazine to become *Multichannel Merchant* and serves executives at companies selling directly to customers. Ramaswami spent most of her professional career as a magazine editor and frequently advised her staff to develop story ideas in this manner:

- *Read* — Not just other trade magazines, but anything and everything, from *USA Today* to *Motor Trend* to *Vanity Fair* to online newsletters to business newspapers. You never know what you'll find. For instance, I was browsing casually through an issue of *Aviation Week* (my son subscribes to it) when I spotted a story about Boeing using the Internet to streamline communications with its dealers. It was a great business-to-business operations case study that we adapted for our readers.
- *Attend trade shows* — Over the years, we've developed a systematic way to "work" these events. At each show, our goal is to find ample material for our print magazine, Web site, weekly newsletter, and other editorial vehicles, as well as possible presenters and topics for our annual conference. Before the show, we look at the brochure to find sessions that pertain to our topics and assign different editors to cover each one.
- *Covering* — Covering means sitting in on the session, taking down notes and quotes as necessary (the quotes make valuable tidbits as well as provide fodder for our weekly e-mail newsletter), and meeting the presenters afterward, introducing them to our magazine, and asking if they would be available to be interviewed for future stories. Another aspect of our trade show coverage is walking the exhibit hall, looking for new companies that might possibly be interested in advertising in the magazine; we pass on these leads to our sales folks. On occasion, the clients of these vendors (i.e., the direct-commerce companies we're interested in) might consent to be interviewed for case studies and other features. We pick up tons of "literature" at trade shows, from copies of competitors' magazines (great sources of new story ideas) to university research studies to white papers to media kits. We sift through these when we get home, and usually get several months' worth of material.

- *Survey our editorial advisory board* — About three times a year we send out a brief survey to the members of our advisory board. The people on the board are retail, catalog, or e-commerce operations executives who represent our typical reader — e.g., the VP of logistics for The Borders Group; they're not software vendors or consultants.) The survey asks them to list what their top operational concerns are and what they're doing to deal with these issues, as well as where the execs see their companies heading. Their replies are kept confidential, so they can be totally candid. We use the information only for our own planning purposes and to generate an editorial calendar that is in sync with our readers' needs.
- *Learn from internal meetings* — During monthly powwows that include representatives from the editorial, art, circulation, sales, and conference departments, we discuss the state of our "franchise," directions we're taking, and what's being heard on the street. This doesn't usually generate stories but does give us the market knowledge we need to make accurate decisions about what to cover and when.
- *Glean tips from industry experts* — We get these all the time from trade shows, interviews, casual e-mail exchanges, reader feedback, and so on.
- *Use press releases and found material* — Of course, the amount of public relations material we receive is bottomless. A lot of it is trash, but occasionally we'll find something that we can throw in our weekly newsletter (such as event information), or rarely, a nugget that turns into a great story.

Information and Communication Centers

You can generate ideas by exploring the communication networks of your community. Many institutions and organizations today provide local telephone numbers or toll-free long distance telephone numbers to information lines. These lines are regularly updated reports designed either for the public in general or the news media. When you know you have a subject to write about and you know some of the source organizations and institutions you will use, you should find out if these services exist. Community bulletin boards exist in just about every place where people regularly congregate. Shopping centers, for example, often have community bulletin boards for wide varieties of goods, services, and other items. You will often find these at larger grocery stores, too. Churches, senior citizen centers, park centers, and other community "living rooms" will be good places to find story ideas. In recent years, some community bulletin boards have become interactive

Web sites, chat rooms, newsgroups, or electronic bulletin boards on the Internet. These are public computer sites where basically the same posting practices occur. These virtual communities can be geographic in nature or communities of other types—usually organized by subject interest. For example, go to the recreation center of a park near you. Dance classes, exercise programs, arts and crafts groups, and other organized activities will be promoted in a variety of ways. And you probably see the article possibilities already.

At universities, colleges, and even high schools, campus student centers have a lot going on. Message centers often tell you about lectures, meetings, organizations, programs, and so on. These information centers are not limited to buildings. Bulletin boards often find their way into your home on cable television channels. Community-access channels often run listings of activities that can lead to stories.

Computers are a big part of the story idea search process. A Web site can list useful information. Same for some social media pages. Community organizations use these sites to distribute information about their activities and they are usually kept current. The important key is to check these sources of information on a regular basis and then double-check the information for accuracy before using it in a feature story. Consistent use of these sources eventually pays off with a unique and salable story idea.

Idea Files, Calendars, Datebooks

Well-organized writers keep an idea file, a calendar, or a datebook to plan. Without it, your life as a writer will be filled with scheduling chaos. Idea files can be as simple as scraps of paper with ideas scribbled on them and thrown into a box or file folder. Or they can be digital and more sophisticated and better organized. You can use computer and smartphone apps to build a list.

Others prefer to use digital calendars and datebooks. Calendars and datebooks can be quite sophisticated. For serious writers, it may be easier to work with more than one of these. They can be found at no additional cost if you have Microsoft Office or a similar office tools apps package. Apple, for example, offers an app called Calendar, and Google offers its Web-based Calendar, and they function a lot like Office's Outlook. Outlook is a multi-function calendar program that can be used for several purposes with multiple calendars. Keep one version for personal and private matters and maintain another for your writing and professional activities. The address section of this software is ideal for compiling an on-going source list in a digital address book. Calendars and datebooks can be very simple when in printed form, such as the pocketsize calendars that are often given away at school bookstores. In short, you have many ways to keep track of upcoming events and activities that might lead to article prospects. Online retailers, bookstores, and other retailers sell these tools.

Regardless of what form they take and where you get them, calendars and datebooks are one of the basics of the well-organized professional writer. You might consider a hybrid form of a calendar-idea list. Some writers like to use old-school file folders, one for each month of the year. Others keep hands-on desk books and clip ideas into each appropriate day or week. Some professional writers, using their publication's office or their home workspace, use a large wall calendar or white board for a big picture of upcoming article prospects and deadlines.

Find a system that works for you. Try different approaches until something that fits your personal style is found. If you are organized, you will be more efficient and productive in your work.

Don't forget the seasonal nature of feature writing. For example, *Writer's Digest* contributing editor Frank Dickson (1980) wrote two articles for his magazine that proposed rather timeless story ideas based on the fall and winter seasons. His point, while listing more than 70 ideas in the articles, is that you must plan as much as six months in advance for some stories if you want to sell your work.

Best Sources for Story Ideas

Personal experiences
Social media pages and news feeds
Personal and professional contacts
College and university campuses
Web sites, especially those hosted by local community organizations and institutions
E-mail distribution lists sponsored by specific groups
News groups, chat rooms, and blogs
Meetings and conventions
House and home and your own neighborhood
Libraries, museums
Historians
Other publications in print and online
Television and radio programs
Readers and sources
Editors and fellow writers
Telephone information recordings
Community bulletin boards and communication centers
Calendars and datebooks

Finding Feature Ideas on a Beat

Staff writers for newspapers, magazines, online news, and newsletters often find themselves assigned to a beat. Although there is considerable freedom being a general assignment writer who takes any story assignment that comes along, the opportunity to specialize on a beat appeals to many writers. Although a newspaper beat can be defined as just about any subject or subset—such as health and medicine, transportation, the public zoo, education and the schools, crime, or parks and recreation—magazine, online news, and newsletter writer beats are often even more specific and specialized because of the narrower scope of the publication and audience served.

For some newspaper, magazine, newsletter, or online news beat writers, feature stories can be the exception rather than the rule. Many times, beat reporters are bound by the demands of spot news reporting and they have little time for features. However, a good feature story can serve several purposes for beat writers.

First, they give you a needed diversion from the daily deadline and breaking news writing. Second, they can build bridges with sources because these stories, if accurate and fair, seldom ruffle feathers. Third, they offer readers a new perspective on a familiar subject.

Let's think about the police or crime beat as an example. A writer covering law enforcement on a regular basis will have plenty of breaking spot stories for his or her editors without writing feature articles. Yet, some of the most interesting stories take

readers behind the scenes or go in-depth. They profile officers with special achievements, highlight special crime prevention programs, or offer depth and insight to an unusual event, such as a shocking crime that has recently occurred, or a crime trend affecting a segment of the community, such as senior citizens. Looking at a different beat, a writer covering education can produce many feature articles about schools, students, programs, teachers, administrators, parental activities, organizations, and the successes and failures of the school system.

Daniel Williamson (1975) has argued that beat reporters generate most newspaper features. "Regardless of the reporting specialty you may inherit, feature stories will present an ever-present opportunity to win news sources, educate and inform your readers, and impress your editors with steady, high production" (p. 75).

Magazines, newsletters, and online news sites, on the other hand, also depend on beat writers, but these people are not always on staff. Many magazines depend on freelance writers to be their specialists for articles. Or, if you become a specialist on a magazine staff, remember that either way, it is likely that you will be a specialist for a publication quite narrow in its scope. There are few general interest magazines that remain successful. Unless you work for one of them, it is likely you will be covering a specialized area for readers who have a high level of interest in the subject and, it is also quite likely, a high level of knowledge of the subject as well.

Choosing the Right Angle

All feature articles have a particular approach. It really doesn't matter whether your article is written for a magazine, newspaper, online news site, or newsletter. It must have some sort of angle, some major focus within the subject you have selected. It should also limit itself to one angle or it will have too much direction to it. After you have determined the subject for the article, make a list of all the possible angles of the subject. By exploring your list of options, you begin to get the overall picture and available approaches. Then organize the list. Reorder it. Which one is best? Rank the items on the list according to which you feel are the most appealing and unique to readers. This should help you eliminate some of the less-desired approaches.

With a practical point of view, determine what angles are within your resources. How much time is needed? Are sources easily available? Is travel involved? Can you afford the approach within your budget? What topics interest you the most? Make second, third, and fourth choices for the story's focus in case your favorite choice does not work out. Always have a backup angle to the idea.

Here's an example of giving some focus to a general idea:

Let's suppose you want to write a story for your local city or regional magazine about running. The process of finding the best angle is like a narrowing-down process. What do you want to write about running? Because it is a city or regional magazine, do you write about city trails, street running, night running, or off-street trails in parks or on the edge of the city? Do you write about competitive running, local races, or the local annual marathon or 10K race? Do you write about running clubs or teams, shoes, or other equipment? Do you write about the right clothing, training, or trainers? You make these types of decisions many times in conjunction with an editor. As a freelancer, you are on your own. It is a good idea to have this angle set before you pitch the story.

For this example, you decide you want to write about running from a consumer or participation angle. Can you narrow this down further? Probably. You think this through and decide one approach might be the public tracks, park spaces, indoor training tracks, or even new trails recently built in your area. However, you must go further to determine your final focus. Will you do a user "review" of these facilities? Or create a list story offering the best places to run? Or something else?

Will you simply do a descriptive piece with maps that tells readers where they can be found? Let's say you decide on the descriptive review of running sites. This requires you to walk or run every mile, taking notes along the way about rest stops, traffic, smoothness or the general condition of the route surface, stops along the way for emergencies, staging or parking areas, and even how busy the tracks or outdoor routes get after work and on weekends. Then you find some fellow runners and interview them. Other sources, such as officers of local running clubs, members of the college track and cross-country teams, and local government officials who oversee recreation and parks, also become part of the story. The purpose of this example is to illustrate that you must keep things specific and focused. Without it, your story will drift without any real beginning, middle, or end, and worse, it will not seem to have any point. Benton Patterson (1986) called an article angle "a frame that contains all the pertinent material. Material not pertinent to the angle is left out of the piece. The angle is also like a clothesline from which the piece's bits of information are hung" (p. 59). He added that a feature article's angle helps structure information around a central idea that gives the reader's mind a clear place to rest.

Trying Out Ideas Before Writing

To be fair to yourself and your potential readers, you must try out the idea before you devote time and resources to it. Freelance writer Lorene Hanley Duquin (1987) offered a strategy for polishing your story ideas before you write. She said the approach requires asking yourself six questions and writing down the answers. Here is a much closer look at the questions posed earlier:

1 *Do you really want to write the story?*— You must consider the motivation level. If it is interesting to you and a worthy subject, you should do it. If you cannot seem to get excited about it, how can you expect your article to show that excitement? How can you expect your readers to be stimulated by what you have written?
2 *Are you capable of doing the story?* — Some topics are simply beyond a writer's abilities to complete. Because of their technical complexity, the time involved, or the expenses, it might not be workable. Some great article ideas are just out of reach for average writers. Sometimes, a subject requires the sensitivity or personal experience that you might not have. A mature writer recognizes this and holds the idea until later or gives it up completely.
3 *How much will the story cost you?* — For both staff writers and freelancers, you must consider the resources needed to do a story. For staff writers, you might have a news media organization behind you, but its budget has limitations and priorities that may prevent you from traveling, calling, or otherwise gathering the information you need. Furthermore, this is a serious problem when you are not sure if a publication will pay your expenses. As a freelancer, can you afford to

take the chance? Some ideas will be worth the risk; others will not. Finally, there is the consideration of time. If you have the resource backing you need, does this idea merit the time it will require to do it right? Some long magazine pieces require a month or two of full-time research and writing. Other features can be done in a few hours.

4 *What else can you do with the material?* — What happens to your idea and its development if a targeted publication does not want it? Do you have other publication options? Can this idea become part of another writing project? If you are a staff member, does your publication permit you to market your work to other outlets?
5 *Are there markets for reprints?* —For freelance writers, this is a concern that may not be so important to staff writers. If you write your story from this idea, can you find second and third outlets for the story in the form of reprints? Some magazines regularly reprint major feature articles. Staff writers might not concern themselves with this because they have less control over the distribution of their work. However, some newspaper and magazine groups often exchange the best of their editions through news services and syndicates.
6 *Can you write spinoff stories?* — For the freelance writer, this is a critical point. To make your work pay off at a level that can sustain you, ideas must generate more than one possible story. Can you take the idea and move into several markets with it? For a staff writer on a regular income, this is a little less important. Yet, from a similar perspective, even a staff writer might consider if the idea would have the potential for a series approach or other stories for later issues and editions.

Transitioning an Idea to a Feature Story

Two general steps in developing your idea into a finished manuscript are as follows:

1 *Giving the idea its angle* — Narrow it down. Cut out unnecessary approaches.
2 *Testing the idea for its soundness* — Does it seem logical? Does it make sense on its face? Would you want to read this article if someone else had written it? What do people you know think about it?

Once you have satisfied yourself that these steps are completed, then the prewriting and editing process continues with your first efforts to gather and organize materials for your article. These additional three steps are as follows:

1 *List the research sources* — This subject is covered in depth in Chapter 4, but in developing an article idea before the writing stage, you now should consider what research would be necessary. Where do you go?
2 *Make a rough outline of the idea* — You should have some idea of the thrust or angle of the story by now and can begin to list major sections of the article on paper. This will help you understand what needs to be done next.
3 *List possible interviews and sources* — What persons will be a part of the story? What areas of expertise will they represent? How will you find them? Are they accessible?

Chapter 4

Research for Your Feature Story

Feature writers, as well as all other journalists at *The Washington Post*, depend on research for the ultimate success of their stories. Research can provide vital background and depth, identify sources, and generally prepare writers for key interviews. Feature writers rely on research both before *and* after the writing process, but it is the research in early stages of story crafting and reporting that can shape the stories more than fact-checking after the story is finished, says veteran *Post* news researcher Julie Tate (Canby & Semonche, 2008).

Background research comes in many forms. For most students, until they learn more skills, it is just searching a few key words with the basic Google Search Console, the tool when you type https://google.com. But just this level of digging will not do, even in a deadline rush. You must be much more thorough. For one thing, offering a key word or two in Google is not using this resource in its best manner. Experienced online searchers know Google has numerous search tools, including an advanced tool on the basic search page. It also has other advanced research tools such as Google Scholar for academic subjects, YouTube for video, Google News, Google Books, Google Blogger, and much more. Try them.

And that is just Google. There is so much beyond Google. Many writers, on their own, will use whatever they have nearby, such as their favorite online resources, the place where they work, or, perhaps, a local library. Writers who are on the staff of a publication may also have some sort of professional facility to help with research and, perhaps, even research professionals to assist in finding the needed information or checking a fact. And they will have access to pricey commercial database searches.

If you are on a publication staff, your organization probably has some form of research center or library available for research by editors, reporters, staff writers, and others in the newsroom. Depending on the size and nature of the publication, the library and research resources can be vast (e.g., at a major newspaper or magazine group offices) or nonexistent (a weekly newspaper or small regional magazine. The library staff members, if available, can provide valued support for writers and editors in the preparation of their daily features and news stories. Staff writers and reporters may have access to an Intranet (a network within the Internet) restricted to employees only, e-mail, and text and image archives of the newspaper, but librarians provide the more specialized assistance. And, many times, freelance writers on assignment for these publications can obtain access to them as well.

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However, if you often write remotely and freelance, then you are likely on your own. Unfortunately, many beginning freelance writers do not have access to research centers. Students have their university and college libraries and librarians available, but freelancers out of school and on their own must depend on public libraries and resources such as the Web.

Today, an enormous library is out there just waiting for you to use it—the Web. For much of the information you will need for an article, you will not have to go much farther than your computer. These days, the serious writer who does his or her own research is becoming a computer research whiz, weaving his or her way in and out of digital libraries and databases in a wide range of formats. Mix this with the already looming size and vastness of traditional library collections, and the research process has taken on new meaning when applied to article writing. Most college and university library systems offer hundreds, if not thousands, of searchable full-text archives and databases at no cost to students, staff, and faculty. Research, if you just think about it, can also help you as a writer to get away from what we call "comfort zones" with sources and ideas and help elevate your work to new levels as well as new specialized markets (McDonnell, 2007). Research can also lead you to experts that will strengthen your stories with their in-depth perspectives (Formichelli, 2006).

Have you found a good idea that you want to develop into a feature article? Do you need to find some basic information about it? Perhaps you need to dig deeper for all there is on a current subject? That's what you learn how to do here. The focus is on using both online and traditional library resources.

Research is diligent investigation and inquiry into a subject. It is such an important step and professional writers take time to do it. Not only would it be rare to write an article without any research or fact-checking, but it also borders on foolish. It is a common pitfall for beginners who think they know enough to write an opinion feature or some other type of article with little or no background work. Writers who work hard to get facts right will win the favor and appreciation of their editors, also, of course (Hawn, 2005).

Effective research requires a plan. Freelance writer Gary Stern (1993), whose work has been published in His work has appeared in *Investors Business Daily*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and Reuters, advised getting organized before beginning any research. "Before you launch your research, plan your strategy … . Do your homework" (Stern, p. 36). Yet, because professional writers must do research for their articles, they often take it for granted. However, they take the time and expense to do the research and are always glad they did.

San Diego freelance writer Andy Rathbone is a believer in this approach. He subscribes to the "research first" approach in his work. Rathbone, the author of computing books, magazine articles, and newspaper feature stories about such wide-ranging topics as how to use computers and computer software, food preparation, dining in restaurants, humor, travel, and electronics, says research is one of his first steps in his work. Not only will he spend time on it, but he is also not afraid to spend considerable money when it is necessary. "When writing computer books, I've spent $300 at the bookstores to grab all the competing books. It's important to know what's been discussed by the competition."

Minneapolis writer Steve Perlstein agrees with this approach to research. He finds the writing and reporting–researching processes to be inseparable. Perlstein, who has

written as a staff member at major daily newspapers as well as for United Press International, has written two books and numerous national magazine articles. Perlstein commented: "For me, writing and reporting mesh; one begets the other, and one cannot exist without the other. I've always considered myself a natural writer who had to learn reporting. Some are the other way around. When I pull in an assignment, I first write a list of all the possible sources I can think of from all sides of the issue. Unless I can come up with a compelling reason otherwise, I wind up calling everyone on this list. And usually, each of these people gives me one or two others to call (I always ask), or a book or article I should read for my research. I regularly use databases from the library and online services to flesh out my background knowledge before I call anybody—I've found most sources are exponentially more forthcoming when you indicate you have at least a rudimentary knowledge of what you are asking them. They also are more likely to think you'll know if they are lying, so they don't try it as often" (Personal communication to author, January 15, 1998).

News research—and news reporting—are all digital, depending on archives and database research, as Perlstein suggests. Source lists can be a good place to begin and will become quite valuable. They are easy to create with online tools. Where can I start? What sources can I call on? Where do I go? These days, you need to become skilled with online tools and resources. This chapter focuses on computer archives and databases. These are available through your campus library or a local public library. Then you can ease into the more challenging specialized digital reference materials when you are ready to do so. Campus libraries are very good at offering these in many different disciplines.

Expect to do some serious work and spend some time on it, no matter what research resources you use. Some experts say you should expect to spend as much as 10 hours of research for every single hour you spend writing when working on a feature story.

Using the Web

For those who have toiled long hours in libraries doing things the old-fashioned way, hands-on searching through periodicals and books about a subject, searchable computer archives and databases is the best thing that has come along since moveable type. Computer-based research using full-text archive databases has been available for public use for several decades and promises to be the way to do your research in the years ahead. It will only get better. The hottest online resources for researchers are social media and searchable commercial databases such as LexisNexis Academic and NewsBank. Most campus libraries have these for students and others to use at no cost, and they may be accessible through major city libraries as well. LexisNexis is a large collection of database libraries, actually, and has much more than just full text from U.S. and international newspapers, magazines, television news programs, and numerous public government documents. It offers searchable legal, medical, business, patents, and financial databases to mention only a few. With the basic LexisNexis Academic, a writer can search thousands of publications, some same day of publication, and some decades into the past. Results can be read online, saved as text, or printed. It is much the same with NewsBank. It has been around since the 1970s to offer thousands of newspapers, newswires, Web editions, blogs, videos, broadcast

news transcripts, business periodicals, and government documents. While there are similarities, LexisNexis Academic and NewsBank offer mostly different sources of their content.

It is important to keep in mind that these searchable full-text archives and databases are commercial services provided by businesses. While the use of these may not cost users on campus library systems, in some public libraries, and in newsrooms that subscribe, private users will be expected to set up accounts and pay monthly access fees to use them. Some full-text archive and database services offer limited one-time use and charge users per search. If you are interested in using these searchable database services and do not have library access, check their Web sites for availability and access in your area, for the current services provided, and fees.

What makes the Web appealing to many users is its mix of tools and common base for the transfer of information or data. And, perhaps most valuable for many journalists, increasing numbers of public and private databases are available. While many of the local, state, and national government databases are searchable at no cost in the U.S., not all are. For example, many federal courts' databases require fees although there is a push from some users to end that as well. This is not true outside the U.S. Laws for access to government records and statistics vary wildly around the world, with many nations opting for less openness and transparency in favor of privacy.

Three of the reasons the Web has become so popular are its ease of use, its speed in locating most information, and, of course, its relative convenience. For most users today, the Web is as simple as using a mouse and clicking on the options on the screen. Faster speeds for Wi-Fi and other Internet connections, combined with increasing portability of devices that connect to the Web, make it the go-to tool for research.

There are billions of pages on the Web, so finding useful information on deadline is one of the biggest challenges to feature writers. Unless users know a particular location, fast information retrieval is often difficult. However, a number of search and indexing tools such as our friend Google have evolved on the Web that helps us find what we need.

Each search engine – and there are several good ones such as Firefox, Apple's Safari, Google's Chrome, Microsoft's Edge, Opera, Brave, and DuckDuckGo – seeks to be a package of searching services for users, covering general searches, specialty searches, and advanced searches.

The dangers must be obvious to users today. Social media and the Web in general are becoming overloaded with misinformation. This is false, inaccurate, and misleading content. Much of it is intended to deceive and persuade. As with non-digital sources, there are many ways to assess the quality of an online information source. Writers look for clues to confirm identities or the reliability of the information. They use more than one independent and authoritative source to confirm a fact. This is especially true when important information is involved. There are safe ways to evaluate and critically analyze the usefulness of information from the Web, social media, and other online sources. The safest method, like other types of information, is to determine the origin of the information. Who provided it? Who paid for it to be distributed? Who is responsible for it? What is the age of it? If you can find answers, it will help determine the value of the source and the information.

One of the most valuable uses of online resources is to locate people, or sources, for use in a feature. We often need their contact information and much of it can be found

online. Experienced journalists know that there are many tools available for this task. Although the usefulness, accuracy, and currency of the information we find is uneven, these tools can provide leads for writers seeking to locate information about individuals – such as full names, addresses, telephone numbers, e-mail addresses, and perhaps even work titles and roles or short biographies. This is where a search tool like Google can make such a search fast work.

Social Media and other Online Research

Social media and social networks have become one of the most valuable resources in the past decade for feature writers. As more and more social media and related networks have emerged to serve specific markets and purposes, journalists and writers have found them to be extraordinarily helpful in finding story ideas, finding sources, and in promoting their work. In fact, we devote the next chapter to this subject. We will continue the discussion of social media as research tools for writers there.

E-mail

In addition to sending and receiving individual messages on the Internet, e-mail can be used for other purposes helpful to journalists. Perhaps the leading use is distribution lists. One of the two major forms of electronic discussion groups is the distribution list. The other is the newsgroup. Distribution lists are also known as listservs—named after one of the software programs used to manage the lists. Distribution lists are often free to use but require a subscription to access the list's information as it is posted. Although it can also be accessed in archive form, immediate access is through subscription. Distribution lists are as much a part of the Internet as any of the other utilities. Lists are accessed and read with e-mail. A list manager program distributes information to individual e-mail addresses. A distribution list is a software program that runs on a computer system.

Searchable Archives and Databases

Searchable full-text archives and online databases permit use for unlimited periods at no additional cost. Libraries often make a one-time purchase of a database, such as a newspaper or a magazine over a period of time such as a year and make the data available to users at no cost. Some of these full-text databases are available for public purchase as well as accessible online. The database you request will, of course, depend on the subject of your story. As noted, you can conduct many searches yourself, if you want to learn and want to acquire the additions to your home computer.

Search Strategies

The most challenging aspect of searchable database use is the search strategy. The secret to inexpensive searching is to narrow down the key words that the computer uses to make its search. A key word or series of key words, sometimes used in a

phrase search, defines what the search algorithm seeks within the database. A search of "animals," for example, would work if you wanted to find articles on domestic cats or house cats, but it would generate a lot of additional information not central to your interests. The search would be even better to request "pets" or "cats" or a specific breed such as "Persian cats" or "Siamese cats," if you need to be that narrowly focused.

Blogs

In addition to social media, the Web and Internet in general have presented what seems like countless new research opportunities that go well beyond a quick and basic Google key word or key phrase search. Blogs, for example, have become important outlets for feature writers in the past decade or two, but they have also become valued research resources as well. These are easily accessed, requiring only a browser and an address. As with any other online resources, you must be careful with blog content (Weinman, 2007). Since these "personal journals" are created by their authors and are not ordinarily put through the same editorial process as conventional published content of magazines and newspapers (or other traditional periodicals) and their online sites, writers using blogs must be careful when using facts or even when using opinions expressed in blogs. Blogs may be, however, valuable idea centers and often can lead to useful content if verified by other more reliable sources. Of course, once a blog's content reputation can be established—as with any other published material—it may become quite a resource for writers.

Chat Rooms

Chat rooms can also be useful sources of information. These are virtual gathering places on the Web for persons interested in specific subjects or activities. They are like newsgroups in their nature and user culture. Weblogs or blogs, a somewhat recent writing phenomenon on the Web, also provide interesting prospects for research. These are often diary-like and specialized and often highly personalized treatments of subjects and activities.

Some full-text archive databases, such as the contents of many daily newspapers and major national or specialized magazines, offer complete stories and even different versions that may have appeared in different editions or issues. These databases, when accessed, permit users to look at entire articles and include the date published, headlines/titles, page location, edition, and other similar information. Naturally, these can be extremely valuable for feature writers searching for previously published information.

Some library card catalogues include more than one library within the system (e.g., a large research institution may have numerous specialized libraries such as law, medicine, business, and music) and other special collection contents (e.g., digital collections, school archives, and heritage collections). These are possibly limited to in-house or within-the-institutional system searching, many libraries are now searchable online from almost anywhere in the world. This enables a writer to find material before he or she treks to the library. The scope of these databases may be limited in scope depending on the individual database, primarily because of the high labor cost

of entering older acquisitions and information. Yet these databases are helpful in finding the most recent editions of books, or, at least, the most recent acquisitions by libraries. These searches work on the same principle as the other database searches: you search for the author, the title, or a subject as key words.

Web-based access makes the work convenient. This permits searching the catalog and its holdings at your local or university library through your personal computer from your home or just about anywhere. Think of the time savings from this convenience alone. If this is new to you, go to your school library's Web site and look around. Information about these resources is probably on the library system's home page. To encourage the use of their resources, some large institution libraries provide access to online systems to qualified individuals such as verifiable local residents, registered students, and alumni. In addition to school users, most public colleges and universities that have placed their catalogs online allow the public access for inquiries. Online catalogs are part of library Web sites in most cases.

Critically Assessing Online Content

Like any sources used by journalists, there are many ways to assess the quality of content of an information source. Journalists usually confirm information they plan to use with several independent sources, in fact. This is especially true when important information is involved.

So, why do we fall for fake news or fail to see poor quality information? Psychologists Gordon Pennycook and David Rand feel it is because people can be lazy. "The good news is that psychologists and other social scientists are working hard to understand what prevents people from seeing through propaganda," they wrote(Pennycook & Rand, 2019). "The bad news is that there is not yet a consensus on the answer. Much of the debate among researchers falls into two opposing camps. One group claims that our ability to reason is hijacked by our partisan convictions: that is, we're prone to rationalization. The other group — to which the two of us belong — claims that the problem is that we often fail to exercise our critical faculties: that is, we're mentally lazy."

They also argue that the misinformation issue is not easily dismissed. "This is not just an academic debate; it has real implications for public policy," they wrote. "Our research suggests that the solution to politically charged misinformation should involve devoting resources to the spread of accurate information and to training or encouraging people to think more critically. You aren't doomed to be unreasonable, even in highly politicized times. Just remember that this is also true of people you disagree with."

We journalists should take their suggestions very seriously.

Here are suggested ways to evaluate and critically analyze the usefulness of information from the Web (including social media or other online sources):

1 Study the address (Uniform Resource Locator, or URL) of the Web site. (How can you do this with social media?)
2 What is the main server address? Does it seem official? Is it specific or vague? What does it tell you?

3 What type of site is it? Is it government (.GOV)? Educational (.EDU), Non-profit organization (.ORG)? Military (.MIL)? Commercial (.COM)? Commercial or other type of network (.NET)? Or foreign address (these servers use abbreviations for their countries of origin as extensions)? Keep in mind that there are other domain extension types, such as.TV,.LOAN, or.WORK, but the focus here is on the most used ones. Government sites are generally credible, and information can be used from them with proper attribution. However, remember that this is the *government's* point of view. Educational sites will vary wildly in the quality of information. Be careful, especially with student home pages. Non-profit organization sites offer a particular point of view, so information may be biased. Military sites are like government sites in their credibility, but often lack usefulness because of security limitations. Commercial sites have advertising and public relations content, for the most part since these sites are most-often business marketing tools. Use this information, especially where opinion is involved, carefully. Some commercial sites are leased server space, so use the content of networks with com extensions with caution also. Use other criteria for evaluating the content beyond the site itself. Networks have an incredibly wide range of content, so *beware*. These are typically leased server space, so anyone with a message can find a home on an Internet server.
4 Can you tell which organization, institution, or individual sponsors (who pays for it?) the Web site? This is important with social media content. How can you find the people or a person behind social media content?
5 What do you think about that sponsor? What are the sponsor's motives, or purposes, for maintaining this site? Have you dealt with this sponsor before? What do you know about it?
6 How often is the Web site updated? Can you find a "freshness" date for the pages you are planning to use? (Remember that current does not mean accurate!)
7 Can this site be searched? If so, what sort of information can be located?
8 Does the site give the *original* source of information that is posted? If so, what is it? Do you feel good about the quality of this source? If not, why not?
9 What is the level of expertise of the source given for this information?
10 Can the source of information be trusted to be correct? Honest?
11 Does the site list a contact name, title, mailing address, telephone number, fax number, or E-mail address? Is the individual listed differently from the Webmaster? (Remember that Webmasters may not be associated with the site owners or sponsors other than to maintain the Web site and he or she may not respond.)
12 Do you feel comfortable using information listed on the site's pages in your news story? Why? Why not?
13 Is this information available elsewhere? If so, where?
14 If the information can be used, in what manner? Source ID and contact information. Background for an interview? Background to use in the story? Quotable information for the story? How do you attribute it to your story?

News Media Libraries

Most established news organizations have some sort of internal reference library. These days, these resources include digital reference books, some printed reference

books, internal content collections such as searchable full text and images, and access to commercial databases. Companies have seen these digital content resources grow to potential revenue centers (e.g., some now sell access to their original information to the public), budgets have grown and so have usable resources. A larger newspaper, magazine, online news site, or newsletter will have a staff of professional news librarians and sophisticated computer systems to assist you in your work. In fact, some companies insist on librarians conducting computer searches because that controls costs. However, smaller newspapers, magazines, and newsletters, as well as bureaus of larger news organizations, usually are not as well equipped. As a writer for a smaller publication, you may have to pay for such search expenses yourself. This forces you to be more resourceful in finding information on your own.

If you are fortunate enough to have a news library at your office, information is usually filed two ways—by newsmaker's name and by subject matter—and there are usually two categories: article clippings and still photographs. All news libraries seem to have a standard set of atlases, abstracts, directories, handbooks, encyclopedias, almanacs, and other general reference books. Libraries should update their holdings as often as new editions are published. Later, some titles are offered for starting your own desktop reference library.

Many writers feel you can never have too many reference books, printed or digital, within arm's reach of your favorite writing spot. The standard tools for finding information at full-service libraries are card and online catalogs, as well as book and automated indexes. Specialized news libraries are not often that well organized. When it doubt, get someone to help you.

Public and Private Libraries

Both public and private libraries are your next options in conducting research for your article. If you cannot find what you seek at your own organization's news library, then go to your local public library. In many communities, there are also university and college libraries, but these are sometimes restricted.

Many state universities and college libraries are open to the public, but some private schools limit access to faculty, students, staff, and alumni. If you need to use a private library, contact the director of the library for permission to use it. Public libraries, such as those supported by city or county funds, often contain excellent sources, particularly for local and regional subjects. If you reside in a metropolitan area, then the wealth of library resources should be great. The only restrictions for public libraries are hours of operation and demand on resources.

Some special collections are accessible only by advance arrangement, but the reference materials that you need may be available for your use. Besides your office library, public libraries, and academic facilities, there are three types of special libraries to remember. First, you can often use area historical society libraries. Many communities have these, and in state capitals, there may be several that are open to the public. Second, there are museum libraries. Presidential libraries and topical museums are examples of this type of facility. Third, there are company and corporate libraries. Large corporations, such as those on the Fortune 500 list, maintain these for employees but facilities may be available for your use if you request

permission. If you are not permitted on-site, it is possible to get assistance through the public relations or public affairs department of the company.

Most libraries have open stacks. That is, the shelves are open for you to browse and to find your own materials. However, some libraries do not open their stacks because of theft, incorrect shelving, and other loss of valuable materials. This is a hardship for you because you must list the books you want and request a clerk to get them for you. This takes time. You might want to talk to the director of the library for permission to use the stacks if your research project is complex and you can establish that you will use the privilege with responsibility. Your ability to take advantage of whatever library you use depends on you and one other person: an experienced professional reference librarian who specializes in the subject about which you are writing. Subject specialists are on staff to assist you, so call on them when you need assistance.

Another service to remember is the networking that libraries use to multiply their resources. Many libraries link together in national, state, or regional networks to loan and exchange materials needed by borrowers. These interlibrary loan services may be fee-based and may take time to use, but they can save you a lot of travel expenses to find materials not locally available. Finally, check the facility's hours of operation before you leave home. Hours can change and a telephone call may save you valuable time.

Useful Online Research Tools

Just about all writers need to check facts or find a little bit of information that is not convenient to locate. For example, you might need to know a fact for a travel feature, such as the average daily summer temperatures in Toronto and Mexico City. Go to a reference book or an online reference site. It's quite easy to find with a simple Google key word search or a search on a smartphone weather app. Or maybe you need to know the top five amusement parks in attendance in the world. This is a bit more complicated, but an online search of an amusement park industry association Web site might be the solution.

Although writers need to get their facts straight, many large publications employ fact checkers to make sure the information is accurate and correct. Staci Bonner (1995), a freelance magazine writer and former research editor for *Spin*, a national entertainment magazine, said that professional writers could not submit manuscripts with factual errors in them any more than they would submit manuscripts with grammatical or other writing errors. "Publications vary widely in their fact-checking techniques" (Bonner, 1995, p. 37). Bonner pointed to several areas of information that must concern writers, including names, numbers, rumors, job titles, ages, dates and times, punctuation, geography, deaths, brand names, chronologies, and quotations.

To begin checking your own facts online directories are a place to start. These are specialized online books that list wide-ranging content such as membership lists and statistics. While some may not be accessible for free or for the public, a surprising number of these resources can be used at no cost on the Web. For example, FindLaw (FindLaw.com), a service of Thomson Reuters, provides online legal information for individuals and businesses. The information is free and current. Perhaps its best free resource is its lawyer directory, a reference for checking names, locations, specializations of firms, and contact information. It can also be used to find expert sources

for stories about, for example, immigration or family law. The search can be done by specialization and geography by zip code.

There are also online almanacs, handbooks, and guidebooks. Some of these general references are inexpensive and easy to use. These references are published independently by governments or companies. One popular example is the searchable World Factbook issued by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (the well-known CIA). This Web-based guide is free to use and can be found at https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/. It includes oft-needed information such as a brief history of a country, statistics about its people, the type of government, economic and energy information, and data about communications, transportation, military, terrorism, and transnational issues for 266 different entries. Its value to travel and other feature writers should be clear.

Online atlases are useful because they include a great deal more information than just maps and geographic data. For starters, you can learn a great deal by simply studying a map of an area. Look at Google Maps (https://www.google.com/maps/). It is free and fast. These sites often contain more than just visual representations of a place, such as photographs, businesses, public sites, different views (such as terrain, public transit, traffic congestion, bicycle routes, point-to-point distance and routing calculators, and other information of value to writers. When geography and proximity are important to a story, online atlases and mapping tools will likely contain the answers. You can use them to verify locations, distances, spellings, population, trade, industry, available natural resources, economic development politics, and distribution systems.

Similarly, online encyclopedias should not be overlooked either because these tools can often give you an authoritative introduction to a subject. Online encyclopedias are often wikis, or collaborative tools on the Web. The best known is Wikipedia (https://www.wikipedia.org/). This resource is written and edited by contributors and is free to use. Its value has improved in recent years with more internal effort to verify and check the information it contains. Early in its online life, there were incidents of false entries or false information added to existing entries. Regardless, it serves as a strong first stop in searching for basic information.

Another example of a useful encyclopedia for finding expert sources at the national level for an article is encyclopedia.com (https://www.encyclopedia.com). This site offers free access, but with advertising content, to more than 300,000 entries with information from published sources such as the Oxford University Press and *Columbia Encyclopedia*. It includes text, photographs, graphics, and video. Some content is downloadable, also. Simply look up the topic.

Abstracts are valuable because these online tools take sets of statistics and other data and condense the data into useful form for the user. Abstracts such as ProQuest's *Dissertation Abstracts* list bibliographic information and offer annotations or summaries of doctoral dissertations. These are research projects of cutting-edge subjects by the newest experts in different disciplines. Chronologies or timelines are reference resources that list events in chronological order over time. Many of these are limited to certain periods of time, such as a decade or century, or are limited to the duration of an historic event, such as the global COVID-19 pandemic that began in early 2020, a competitive 2020 presidential election involving the first woman nominee by a major party for president, or an event that occurred more than

a century ago, such as the American Civil War. Often these sorts of tools are offered by college and university libraries. For example, Western Michigan University offers a world history timeline (https://libguides.wmich.edu/WorldHistory/timelines) and the University of Massachusetts offers a timeline tool focused on American history (http://americancenturies.mass.edu/chronology/make_chronology.jsp).

Online dictionaries are critical to research and writing. Many general dictionaries are available online. Two of the most common are Google Search and Dictionary.com. But many name-brand dictionaries, such as one published by Merriam-Webster (https://www.merriam-webster.com), are also searchable online. With Google basic search, simply type "define misinformation" or some other word and it instantly returns a definition from Oxford Languages. At Dictionary.com (http://www.dictionary.com), there are definitions of words and phrases and much more.

There are also many specialized dictionaries within specific disciplines, such as law, medicine, computing, and other sciences, that can help you when working with complex subjects that require explanations for your readers. If you want to specialize in a subject as a feature writer, consider obtaining a discipline's specialized dictionary, even if it is a considerable investment. It may help you through interviews and, even more importantly, prevent errors. For legal sources for example, a good source is *Black's Law Dictionary*. It's available for free online (https://thelawdictionary.org/legal-dictionary) or may be purchased in hard cover.

Biographical dictionaries are extremely helpful in researching well-known persons. Many can be found in libraries as reference books. Good examples are *Current Biography*, *Contemporary Authors,* or *Who's Who*. There are biographical master indexes to these reference books that are kept in most major libraries. Many of these books are updated regularly. Some of this content has gone online but may require memberships or fees to access. A few online biographical Websites include biography.com, Infoplease Biography, Legacy.com (searches obituaries), BBC Historical Figures, and Spotlight Biography.

There are alternatives to print editions and fee-based Web sites. One is to search the person on social networks such as LinkedIn. Even if you don't have an account, you can often see useful professional information about an individual such as where the person works, the position title, contact information, and responsibilities. For other people, a free account is required to see what is posted by users. If this is not workable, searching Google by full name and another piece of information with "resume" or "biography" or even "bio" may hit sites with the needed information.

Finding who said something is easy with online famous quotations sites. Yes, there are numerous printed books, such as *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*. But this category of reference materials can be a valued source to writers. When you need an authoritative quote or a familiar quote to make your point, you can go online for many of the best ones. Some of these sites are BrainyQuote, Wikiquote, Quotery, QuoteLyfe, and Goodreads. These can be searched by the topic or subject of the quotation, by speakers and authors, literary works, movies, TV shows, specific themes, places, and even recent items in the news.

Always keep in mind that these are just a few examples of online references. There are many other categories and examples, too many to discuss here. And many public and private libraries include hundreds of reference books in print for use by patrons.

Your college or university library may have these in the reference section if an online reference requires fees or other barriers to access.

Government Web Sites and Publications

Tens of thousands of federal, state, and local government publications are created in the United States each year and these can help you during research for a story. As has been often said about Washington, DC, the information you need is there, but you must know how and where to find it. This applies to online government publications. All branches of government produce publications, both in print and online. These are mostly public documents, created by tax dollars, although some are classified and unavailable to the public. To help find the information you want, there are printed and online indexes, especially at the federal level. General indexes, such as the monthly *Catalog of U.S. Government Publications* from the Government Printing Office, can help. This contains a subject index of new materials that are issued. The online edition (https://catalog.gpo.gov/) can be searched for free by keywords, titles, subjects, and in eight specific catalogs.

Fortunately, much government information and many documents issued each year can be found online at no cost. In recent years, government online sites have improved in organizing the information they contain and have expanded their scope. And most of it is free. Documents found can be printed and many downloaded as Word files, pdfs or in other file formats. In some cases, records or publications are not available in digital form at no cost, but they may be accessed or ordered online for a listed price. On the other hand, access to this information is much different from a decade ago. The breadth and scope of the information at all levels, from most local to national and international, is growing. A good strategy is to search online and then look for published copies in local libraries. Federal information, such as government publications from the executive branch departments and from Congress, is increasingly available in some digital formats such as pdf (portable document file) formats.

Congressional sources provide us with hearings documents on specialized topics such as pending legislation or ongoing concern about medical care, agriculture, and even the routine daily activities of Congress. These documents are available at local libraries that are designated U.S. Government document depository libraries or from the bookstores of the U.S. Government Printing Office (USGPO). USGPO materials are sold, of course, but often at prices lower than what a commercial publisher might charge. Their availability can be determined at the agency's Web site (http://www.gpo.gov/). Some of this legislative information can be found online with various searches also. For example, both the House of Representatives (https://www.house.gov) and Senate (https://www.senate.gov) have their own Web sites offering links to calendars, member pages, floor activity, proceedings, and hearings.

Executive branch sources cover subjects as broad as the various departments that help the White House carry out the laws of the land. The *Federal Register* (https://www.federalregister.gov/) and the annual *Code of Federal Regulations* (https://www.govinfo.gov/app/collection/cfr) are both good print and online sources for orders, proclamations, and regulations that are announced by the White House. A writer interested in the words of the president may check the *Compilation of Presidential Documents* (https://www.govinfo.gov/help/cpd). And it seems necessary to remind

you that there is often valuable information on the White House's own Web site (https://www.whitehouse.gov/). It can be useful for reference for presidential business in many cases, but the site has become a promotional tool for whichever administration is in office.

Online Sources for Story Research

1 Online experts directories listing recognized authorities and experts such as professors, consultants, and researchers.
2 Searchable online reference books and periodicals, such as:
dictionaries
encyclopedias
biographical dictionaries
atlases, maps, and gazetteers
yearbooks
almanacs
books of quotations
abstracts
chronologies
indexes
3 Searchable online databases, such as:
Government sites
Publication of full-text archive services
Other digital information retrieval systems
4 Social media:
News feeds
Organization and business pages
5 Libraries, such as:
Your news organization's library
Local college and university libraries
Local and regional public and private libraries

Want to know how U. S. population trends are changing or how many appliances are in a state or county? Use current census data provided by the federal government's Bureau of the Census in the Department of Commerce. The Census Web site (https://www.census.gov) has become one of the best go-to reference sites for journalists because of its remarkable wealth of statistics about the American people and its population demographics, business, employment, housing, health, voting and race and ethnicity.

In law enforcement, you can find online reports by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (such as the *Uniform Crime Report,* issued annually) on the FBI Web site. This collection of crime statistics and information is so popular it has its own section of the FBI site (https://www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/ucr). For other regulations,

reports and books are frequently issued by agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration and by the Federal Communications Commission on their Web sites.

At the state level, there are many useful online publications and documents. Some states have been faster than others in transitioning content from print to online, but writers can find much more state-level information today than ever before. Look for online handbooks, directories, guidebooks, and other volumes produced by official and private sources. One good example of an online official reference book is the *Blue Book* (https://legis.wisconsin.gov/LRB/blue-book) produced by the Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau each year. Other general reference books can be excellent regional sources and are published in both the public and private sectors. These books, such as the *Texas Almanac* (https://www.texasalmanac.com), are published annually or biannually.

Online local government publications vary a great deal in quantity and quality. Most metropolitan areas produce a substantial number of publications and local reference materials, and many are recognizing the value of putting them online for citizens. But small counties, villages, and towns do not always have the resources to do so. Generally, they cannot afford, and do not have, the space to archive much information except that which is required by law. And it follows that they do not have the money to go online also. If you cannot find what you want at a city hall, go to the county or parish as your main regional source.

A Pulitzer Prize Winner Emphasizes Research

Jacqui Banaszynski is a journalism professor at the University of Missouri and former associate managing editor for *The Seattle Times* and senior editor for enterprise for *The Oregonian* in Portland. Before that, she was a feature writer for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press,* and is a veteran feature writer and features editor. She won the Pulitzer Prize for feature writing in 1988. She described her approach to research for her own writing:

> Often history-in-the-making catches us by surprise. Only a few of us who covered the meltdown of Three Mile Island had ever studied the innards of a nuclear power plant. Fewer still had first-hand knowledge of volcanoes when we were sent to Washington for the eruption of Mount St. Helens. AIDS remains such a mystery that we struggle to find the questions—to say nothing of the answers.
>
> Yet we are expected to write about these subjects with accuracy and authority. Often, we are expected to do that on deadline. So we improvise. We learn to be quick with our pens, quicker with our questions, instant with our analysis. In a few days or a few hours, we cull the pertinent wisdom from experts who have spent lifetimes studying a topic. Unless we settle into a specialized beat and nurture our own expertise, we bounce from story to story armed with little but instinct and moxie.
>
> In-depth research is a luxury in the business. Doing your homework—most would call it backgrounding—is a necessity. However rushed the assignment, there are a few basics that will save you embarrassment and mistakes. Start in the newsroom library, or morgue, then expand your search to the public library.

Read everything available in the popular press about your subject. Tap into your newspaper's electronic library and cull some national stories for context.
But beware: You are seeking information, not attitude. Don't let background reading shape your point of view. Don't enter an interview looking for a few quotes to drop into an already-written story. Gather quick tips from other people. Corner an editor or veteran reporter for summaries about your subject. Ask colleagues, friends, and relatives what they want to know about the subject. Supplement your curiosity with theirs. When I did a profile of North Pole explorer Ann Bancroft, my newsroom curiosity survey revealed a question I would have overlooked: How did she go to the bathroom when it was 70-below? That question led to a wonderful anecdote that gave the story some humor, humanity, and dimension.

If you have time, conduct a few pre-interview interviews. Written research will give you background, but it won't give you quotes or character. Glean impressions of your subject first-hand—from boosters, from detractors, and from knowledgeable, but detached, observers. Check their comments against those of your subject.

Since being awarded a Pulitzer Prize, I have been on the receiving end of reporters' notebooks—a vantage point that has underscored some basic journalistic tenets that we too often take for granted. When reporters interview me, I expect them to already have our Pulitzer series "AIDS in the Heartland" and a few other accessible clippings from local newspapers that would include my basic biography. The diligent ones also will have talked to one or more people about me—perhaps an editor or a colleague or one of my story subjects. If they haven't done that legwork, I find myself feeling impatient and a bit insulted. I am not willing to give my time and candor to someone who hasn't shown me courtesy to do their homework. I imagine my interview subjects feel the same way (Personal communication to author, February 15, 1993).

Chapter 5

Using Social Media in Features

Erin Brown is a correspondent for *The Hockey News* (https://thehockeynews.com) and a senior lecturer who teaches new media, Web site design, and online journalism courses at the University of Miami. When she is working as a writer, covering the Florida Panthers in the National Hockey League and other professional hockey, she finds social media helpful in several ways.

"My focus is writing about ice hockey for online and print media. My social media presence is on Twitter (@rinkside) because this is where the community I cover, my audience, and medium, meet. If I were a photojournalist, I'd spend more time on Instagram; a broadcast journalist, or videographer, YouTube and TikTok," she explained.

"I can connect and interact with the community I cover to find stories and share my work. In doing so, it builds trust in me as a fair and reputable voice, for both my readers and those I write about. As I build trust, more people are drawn to my work and opportunities grow for more great stories to be told. For instance, I learned through my Twitter feed that the Premiere Hockey Federation, a women's professional league, would be holding its Isobel Cup tournament nearby. I had never covered women's hockey and wanted to experience a new angle, so I offered to report on the event for *The Hockey News*. I wrote two stories, but the ideas and assignments emerging from covering the event continue to sprout."

Brown uses social media as a newsgathering tool, but also as a promotional device. For news reporters and for feature writers, social media have become another go-to resource alongside interviewing and observing. For Brown, they are ready-made information gathering and distribution platforms.

"I've come to look at my social profile as the public version of my reporter's notebook. It includes the same kind of raw detail I'd scribble out on paper – notes from practices or games, interesting statistics, behind-the-scenes details, the many fun, interesting bits that never fit into the flow of a story. These are perfect for social media," she said.

"And, of course, when my stories are published, I share that news. It's important to drive traffic back to the publication's Web site or alert people to keep an eye out for an upcoming issue on newsstands. They're paying the bills, right? I'll usually include a photo of the magazine cover and a portion of the spread – never the whole story! – to tease my work."

Brown said she believes social media can help and hinder reporting for news and feature stories.

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"It can help cultivate stories and aid reporting because you are tapping into a massive population, which is organized in distinct communities. The value of that resource cannot be understated. But it also requires a lot of exhausting work, I think, people sometimes forget about. It's easy to fall prey to the myth everything digital is designed to make life effortless," Brown explained.

"It can be time consuming and exhausting to navigate thousands of accounts across multiple platforms, then determine which are valid sources. Multimedia content creation is definitely more involved than pecking out words. It's incredibly high-stress work. Another issue is disinformation and misinformation. Journalists need to be extra savvy in fact-checking information both discovered and shared on social media. Getting caught up in speed over accuracy can be very damaging to your credibility and brand."

"To circle back, social media can be an immense help in finding stories, but it also requires real responsibility as a journalist. The audience and opportunities are endless, but so are the chances to harm your reputation as someone who does good work. It is important to approach everything with a healthy dose of skepticism and do the necessary research to make sure the truth checks out," Brown said.

Brown, who previously worked as a sports journalist and producer for ESPN, CBS Sports, and Fox Sports, now focuses on the NHL, but also writes about professional baseball, basketball, football, and golf, says she often finds strong feature story ideas from social media posts.

"I find social media keeps me up-to-date and is part of researching details for a story before I dive into interviews. It can help develop an angle which makes a story accessible to others who may not be interested in it on a micro level."

"For instance, many athletes are more vocal about social issues and promoting community causes. The lead-in of a story I wrote about the Florida Panthers' Anthony Duclair – a minority player in the National Hockey League – focused heavily on a family whose young son was inspired to start playing by seeing a pro athlete who looked like him. My awareness of this came from social media. Maybe a reader isn't interested in the team or player I'm writing about, but they can appreciate the impact he's having," she stated.

"When I wrote about the Isobel Cup, an angle which factored into my story is how these athletes also have careers since they don't yet earn enough to make playing a full-time job. Many of the women are on social media and show their roles away from the ice, so it was helpful to identify who had interesting or eye-opening careers to discuss when asking about how they balanced their schedules. And sometimes you stumble upon something fun. During the 2021–2022 season, Jeremy Swayman and Linus Ullmark, goalies for the Boston Bruins, went viral on social media for their postgame handshakes. When I covered the IIHF U18 Women's World Championship a few months later, I noticed the many goalies from different countries had routines as well. The viral post put 'goalie love' on my radar and seeing it in person greenlit my pursuit of a story idea on the habits and bond goalies developed at the tournament" (Personal communication to author, July 18, 2022).

Similarly, NBC News senior social newsgathering reporter Shamar Walters (2021) recently noted that journalists often start their reporting using user-generated content found on social media. That is, we look for whatever people have posted that is relevant to the story we are writing. "Social newsgathering basics start with user-generated

content. That's videos, photos, and text posts written or filmed by members of the public. They might be uploaded to social media platforms, shared on messaging apps or sometimes sent directly to journalists," Walters wrote.

But we cannot simply just grab content and insert it into our story either by re-typing it or using a screen-capture and pasting a tweet or photograph.

"When a journalist reporting on an incident first discovers photos while searching social media, those images are not yet ready for reporting. We all know that not everything we see on the internet is what it appears to be," Walters stated. "We might find images posted on social media that claim to be from one incident, but are actually from another. This is sometimes because of the rumor effect – someone unintentionally posts something inaccurate and then others share it. There are other times when content is posted deliberately to mislead or trick other users."

Walters said concern, then, is about verification of the information we find on social media. He said asking questions about any found content will help:

- What do I know about the person who posted this?
- Do I think they know this information first-hand?
- If it's a photo or video, who captured it?
- When and where did this happen?
- Are other trustworthy sources sharing the same information?

The solution, he argues, is to seek independent sources to help with verification. He recommends using public officials, eyewitnesses, and even government records. An important step in using social media in newsgathering is to attempt to find and talk to the person posting the information. This can be an individual on his or her own or someone representing an organization. "Try to make contact with the original source of any user-generated content. Even though the social newsgathering team works with online tools, they rely on a traditional premise of journalism – talking to people directly," Walters (2021) noted. "One reason to reach out to an original poster of a photo or video is to get permission to include the image in reports. That individual also likely has additional information and details that could be valuable for reporting. Reporters engaging with a member of the public through social media need to be sensitive to that person's circumstances. Sometimes these sources have gone through traumatic events or are in dangerous situations. Pay attention to the language they are using in their posts. This should give a good sense of if, when and how to reach out to them."

Despite the need to verify and confirm information found in social media feeds, we need the information. It is out there, often relatively easy and lightning-fast to find and, much of the time, helpful to our stories. Not only do we find valuable sources and build on their comments, photos, videos, and described experiences, but we can also use social media platforms to communicate with our readers.

"Journalists increasingly rely on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to pursue audience engagement, which many believe necessary for improving journalism's popularity and credibility among the public," Jacob Nelson (2021), an Arizona State University digital arts professor, wrote. "However, journalists have learned that engaging with their audiences via social media platforms carries personal and professional risks – namely accusations of political bias that can lead to

termination from their jobs, as well as trolling, doxing, and threats of physical violence. This is especially true for women journalists and journalists of color. Journalists consequently find themselves walking a 'Twitter tightrope,' where they feel compelled to use social media platforms to build awareness for and trust in their work, yet simultaneously apprehensive about the professional pitfalls and "dark participation they encounter while doing so."

Facebook and YouTube are the two largest and oldest social networking services, although they are quite different in purpose and content. They are only one part of the vast collection of platforms within the term social media. But the modern-day social media that we use and know so well got their start with Facebook emerging in 2004. These modern tech tools have a wide range of purposes and uses.

Defining Social Media

What do we mean by social media? What is a social network? For most experts, social media is an umbrella term and social network is a subset. Regardless, social media is a difficult term even for Internet experts to define. Some will define it very narrowly and others prefer to look at it very broadly. In the online collaborative encyclopedia Wikipedia, there is a useful general discussion of this issue:

> The idea that social media are defined simply by their ability to bring people together has been seen as too broad, as this would suggest that fundamentally different technologies like the telegraph and telephone are also social media. The terminology is unclear, with some early researchers referring to social media as social networks or social networking services in the mid 2000s.
>
> (Social media, 2022)

The Wikipedia entry identifies four common features unique to social media services:

- Social media are Web 2.0 Internet-based applications.
- User-generated content is the lifeblood of social media.
- Users create service-specific profiles for the site or app that are designed and maintained by each social medium.
- Social media facilitate the development of online social networks by connecting a user with those of other individuals or groups.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines social media as "forms of electronic communication (such as Web sites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos)" (Merriam-Webster, 2022).

The experts contributing to the social media discussion in Wikipedia state that the "variety of evolving stand-alone and built-in social media services makes it challenging to define them," but they list the following types: (Social media, 2022)

- Blogs (Huffington Post, Boing Boing)
- Business networks (LinkedIn, XING)
- Collaborative projects (Wikipedia, Mozilla)

- Enterprise social networks (Yammer, Socialcast)
- Forums (Gaia Online, IGN Boards)
- Microblogs (Twitter, Tumblr)
- Photo sharing (Flickr, Photobucket)
- Products/services review (Amazon, Elance)
- Social bookmarking (Delicious, Pinterest)
- Social gaming (Mafia Wars)
- Social network sites (Facebook, Google+)
- Video sharing (YouTube, Vimeo)
- Virtual worlds (Second Life, Twinity)

Journalists Use Social Media

What social media platforms do journalists find most useful? A 2022 study by the national non-partisan think-tank Pew Research Center says journalists are different from the American public in social media choices and how they are used (Jurkowitz & Gottfried, 2022). Almost all (94%) journalists surveyed said they used social media in some form. For work-related tasks, they used Twitter (69%) and Facebook (52%) the most, followed by much less use of Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, and others. In contrast, the American public favored Facebook (31%) and YouTube (22%) with Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, and others following. For these journalists, their personal characteristics help define their use. Twitter is the favorite of younger journalists (18–29) with less use by older journalists. Facebook is the most used by older journalists. Interestingly, there are also differences according to the type of news organization where a journalist works. TV and online journalists use Twitter more than radio and print, for example. TV and radio use Facebook more than print and online journalists.

Dr. Yanfang Wu, an assistant professor at the University of Miami , is an expert in newsroom uses of social media by journalists. A former broadcast journalist for China Central Television and Beijing Television, she teaches social media classes to journalism and other mass communication students and conducts an extensive research program about the role of social media in newsrooms, how they are used in covering major news stories, and the importance of social media in news coverage of politics and elections (Wu, 2017; Wu, 2022).

Wu has analyzed data from a national online survey of working journalists to look at how reporters and editors use social media in their work. Like the Pew Research Center study, she found differences in how journalists use social media. Wu determined that, within newsrooms, journalists use social media depending on what they do. For example, reporters and writers view and use social media differently than their editors.

"Reporters and editors perform different journalistic duties in traditional newsrooms. With the popularity of social media, journalism is transitioning into a highly varied and diverse range of practices. Utilizing a cross-sectional, self-administered questionnaire, [this] online survey study seeks to understand how social media is disrupting the traditional collaborative model between reporters and editors in American newsrooms. The study found that newsrooms' integration of social media and entrepreneurialism is blurring the line between reporters and editors. With

journalists taking more entrepreneurial roles, the traditional collaborative model between reporters and editors is being taken place by a hybrid model --- both reporters and editors take on promotional duties in addition to traditional journalistic roles" (Wu, 2017, p. 1).

In 2017, she correctly saw social media use changing from simple promotion and branding to newsgathering and distribution. She stated:

"In a traditional model, reporters target news sources and editors target audiences. How will this traditional model evolve when social media facilitates news gathering and news processing in newsrooms? What strategy will reporters and editors take in the boundary work shift – expansion, expulsion or protection of autonomy – when integrating social media into their journalistic roles? How does the perception of social media as a facilitator differ between reporters and editors due to their different journalistic roles in newsrooms?" Wu (2022, p. 2) stated. "With the popularity of social media, news in the digital age has become a social engaging and social-driven activity," she wrote. (p. 3).

In some of her most recent research, she analyzed 1.2 million Hurricane Dorian tweets posted on the hashtag #Doran on Twitter in 2019. "Social media have become a powerful tool for the public, in particular, the grassroots, to express themselves in crisis communication," Wu (2022, p. 13) noted. "The analysis of large-scale user-generated data on Twitter provides journalists with valuable resources in journalistic inquiry – grasping the tone of this event to report the event more objectively and accurately" (Wu, 2022, p. 14).

"Polarity of tweets is useful for journalists to understand users' emotional responses on a particular topic and predicts how likely users may engage with the topics, which is valuable for journalists' sensemaking, and determining news value in news selection and gatekeeping processes," she wrote (Wu, 2022, p. 16).

Use of social media in newsgathering is not without risks. Singapore journalist Jennifer Alejandro, a news anchor at Channel News Asia with more than 15 years of experience, studied how social media like Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn have affected the way news organizations and news journalists operate during her time as a fellow at the Reuters Institute at Oxford University in England. "The main risks they identified were concerns regarding accuracy, the need for verification, and the loss of control over the information," Alejandro (n.d.) wrote.

Chief editors from different parts of the world were surveyed and said "speed or immediacy was the aspect of social media that helps them best in receiving news. They said the main ways their newsrooms used social media networks were branding and making a presence in the social media sphere, driving traffic to the company's news website, and breaking news," Alejandro (n.d.) added.

Social Media as a Research Tool

Research and practice have indicated that journalists find social media helpful in finding information and people. Source-finding may be the most valued use for many feature writers. Imagine writing a story and not knowing where a certain category of source might be found (e.g., a parent of a child with a rare form of blood disease). On many occasions, a search of Twitter or Facebook will find groups of people bound by their need for support and common experience.

We also use social media to follow newsmakers such as community leaders and celebrities as well as other people we might be interested in writing about for our specialty or beat. And we certainly can use social media to identify and contact expert sources who may be less widely known that we need for interpretation, analysis, and depth in our feature stories.

Frank Strong, writing on his Sword and the Script blog focused on public relations, marketing, and social media , noted six social media trends from a 2021 national survey by Muck Rack and several professional news organizations, in reviewing journalists' uses of social media. First, he said writers and reporters participating in the survey used online news and Twitter, for keeping up with current events. Second, Twitter serves as the most-valued network for journalists. Third, reporters want to devote more time to the use of Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram. Fourth, reporters use business/company social media sites when researching their stories. Fifth, journalists are interested in and track their social media shares. And sixth, reporters don't respond often to story pitches delivered on Twitter, but individual e-mail messages were most effective for suggesting stories (Strong, 2021).

When writing fast-breaking stories and the features that go with them, such as sidebar explainers and profiles, we take advantage of social media to find information quickly. During disasters and tragedies, for example, people involved sometimes post comments, photographs, and videos. Some even stream audio and video live. Reporters and feature writers can find these fast and use the content to further develop their stories.

Molly Young is a watchdog reporter for *The Oregonian* daily newspaper and Oregon Live Web site in Portland. During a presentation at the annual conference of Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE), a national journalism organization, she discussed using social media to find information quickly as a breaking news story unfolds. Her advice is just as helpful to feature writers not working on breaking stories (Young, 2018):

Initial Reports

- Create and maintain a simple spreadsheet to track important links, names, and background information.
- Cast a net for witnesses and firsthand accounts using Facebook and other sites to narrow down possible suspects, victims, and witnesses. Add profile pages and links to monitor the spreadsheet, noting their connections (witnesses, relatives). Take screenshots of essential profiles and posts, including the URL (the universal resource locator, or Internet Web site page address) of where the information was found.
- On Twitter, seek what a witness or relative might say. Use advance search for that using "my," "me," and "I" as key words. Take a screenshot of any essential information, including the URL. Add important information to the contact spreadsheet.
- Contact potential witnesses. Try newsroom databases and search engines for contact information. To do this, search the name and area code for phone numbers (e.g., "John Smith 503"). Narrow results by adding the city, an employer, and so forth. Reach out via social media.

Confirmed Names

- Find personal social media accounts. Use Facebook search and advanced Twitter search.
- On Twitter, download the person's tweets on AllMyTweets.net.
- On Facebook, click on the "About" section and note potential relatives. Search friends, especially those that share last names. Take a screenshot of "likes" and other essential information, including the URLs.
- Google the person's name, e-mail, usernames to find other social media profiles (e.g., on Instagram, LinkedIn, GoFundMe, dating profiles, personal blogs). Take a screenshot of all information, including the URLs.
- Repeat steps for other key players. First priority: Victims and suspects. Second priority: Witnesses, relatives, and friends.

Deeper Searches

- LinkedIn filtered searches can be a good place to find people connected to the incident. (e.g., "Instructors at Umpqua Community College").

Developing Story Ideas with Social Media

Any time a reporter or writer has spare time, it will be well spent browsing through social media. No matter which platform, the content on these sites is rich with possibilities for new stories or localized versions of something happening in another part of the country. Success in mining feature story ideas from social media feeds comes from practice and repetition. It must become a regular writing and reporting habit. It must be part of your daily routine. It's something like having a cup of coffee or bottle of water on your desk in your workspace. Habit.

Some techniques are simple enough. For Twitter, for example, set up an account solely for story idea development. Keep it separate from any other accounts, such as your personal account or one used for promoting your work. With this account, you don't need to post. No need to tweet. Use it to follow organizations, institutions, governments, and people that connect to the areas of feature writing you plan to do. You are monitoring a beat or specialty area for story ideas and even new sources.

For example, a health and wellness feature writer could monitor individuals, institutions, organizations, programs, and other entities active on Twitter. A writer who is interested in Travel features will monitor airlines, hotel groups, resorts, parks, industry leaders, even other reporters doing the same thing. These and other similar feeds provide news feeds filled with ideas of what is happening on a particular day in that specialty. It can be very broad in scope or be limited to a state or locality. That's done by your choices of who and what to follow, of course. The beauty of this strategy is that it can be expanded or restricted at any time. One thing is certain, the potential story ideas will roll into your Web browser or smartphone app. There is no cost, really, other than time to read the account on a regular basis.

The same approach can be used with any other social platforms that might be appropriate to the specialty that you have developed in your writing.

Finding Sources in Social Media

It has been mentioned briefly above that social media can provide very good opportunities for writers to search for and identify people who will become sources for stories in addition to story ideas. Social media, particularly social networks such as Facebook or LinkedIn, have become a particularly valuable tool for finding expert sources such as professionals, consultants, and university researchers.

People-finding is an artform on social media and the Web in general that requires cultivating. Oftentimes, we know there are individuals out there who have experienced what we need in our story. A crime victim. Someone suffering from a health issue. A creative person experimenting with foods. But we don't know them and don't know how to find them. It is often the same with organizations or groups of people. We know they exist but don't know their names, their members, or their locations. Social media networks can make the effort a little easier.

The easiest way to find someone on Facebook (http://www.facebook.com) is to use the Search tool in the top left corner. Enter as much information as you know, such as a name and city. Review the list that is offered to see if you found the person. If you are looking for a group of some sort, go to the Groups section of the Web site by clicking on the menu on the left. Perhaps you are seeking "cancer survivors" for a human-interest feature story. Searching that phrase will result in numerous public and private groups (only group members can see who is in the group and what they post) that you can possibly join, including brief descriptions of their interests and the number of members. Facebook also offers Pages and Profiles for organizations in the left side index. Click on Pages. You can join groups that interest you.

Similarly, LinkedIn (https://www.linkedin.com) offers much for the global professional business community. For journalists, the LinkedIn networks offer access to people we may find useful in our stories. In addition to job searches, for which what many people use the site, you can find people. On the home page of the site, click on Find a Person You Know. This allows users to search for people by name. Searches will offer what a person wants to be public about themselves, such as job title, company, city, information about his or her career, recent activity, and his or her experience (possibly including a resume), education, engaged groups, languages spoken, and a full profile (if you are a member). Keep in mind that you don't need an account for some of this information, depending on the individual's privacy settings. But having a free account will provide access to even more information.

These steps can be repeated with other social media sites. Give it a try. You may be surprised at how much you find on the way to getting your feature written.

Social Media as Writer Branding Tools

A growing way to promote your work as a staff or freelance writer is a social networking site such as Facebook and Twitter (https://twitter.com). Whether you work in an established organization's newsroom or are a freelancer, every feature writer needs an active and vital online presence. You should have an identifiable online base and it should be kept separate from your current or most recent employer's site). Without that, most experienced professionals will agree, your long-term media career prospects are not so good.

Numerous news people are using it to connect with other individuals for marketing purposes. Some social networking sites are specialized for business professionals, such as LinkedIn (http://www.linkedin.com), and are ideal for posting your credentials, summaries of previous work, links to best work or recent work, what you are doing now, and so forth. It is not just a tool for finding work, but it is good for that, also. The features of social networking sites encourage people-to-people connections, linking those with common interests such as editors looking for writers and writers searching for editors who need stories.

Journalists use these sites to build their individual brands. This is especially critical for independent journalists, including those who do freelance feature writing. You can easily start a social media site devoted to you as a professional feature writer and as a platform to present your work. This is the beginning to build you as a brand. It is a first step in marketing your work online. Start a professional social media account by completing your professional profile on the site. This is what you tell others about yourself. Make these choices carefully. The profile is, in essence, a public resume. You will want to highlight your professional credentials, such as your education, specializations, special skills, and previous writing experience. You will need to provide a contact point. This can be an e-mail address created just for that purpose. It makes a lot of professional sense to maintain a separate e-mail address that is just for writing-related messages.

Try running an easy search on Twitter. Search for "freelance writer" and you will find a global community of freelance writers. On any day, there will be both specialized and general subject writers seeking sources, wanting to talk to people about their experiences, and generally looking for professional writing opportunities. Look a bit deeper and there are also freelance writing groups trying to build support networks and members within a state or even a nation.

On Facebook, freelance and independent writers can be found in Groups. There are numerous public and private groups helping writers unite to find work, to form to be supportive (e.g., a group for Female Freelance Writers has about 10,000 members), to share ideas and content, and to help writers develop their careers.

When we think of social media, we think of fun and entertainment. We might not think of them as tools for feature writers. They are. This is increasingly so with each new platform and with each new year. Social media are a relatively new phenomenon – they began to appear in the mid-2000s – in the world of digital media. For today's students, it might seem that they have always been there. They are still new and innovative communication platforms, and we are still learning the best ways to use them as feature writers. They can be a serious newsgathering tool and one that feature writers should use daily with a degree of creativity and caution about the reliability of the information that is found there.

Growth in the use of social media by journalists in their work is widely known. Jacob Nelson is an assistant professor at Arizona State University who prepared a lengthy 2021 summary of new research by Columbia University about journalists and uses of social media that focused on newsroom policies. In the report (Nelson, 2021).

"Social media brings new characteristics like interactive dialogue and social interactions," noted Dublin City University researcher Oscar Michel (2017). "Journalists can now have real conversations with their audience. Online debates have also been put into place so that everyone can express themselves (when

comments are enabled of course). Traditional one-way communication is turning into two-way conversations. Social media has given a real meaning to what freedom of speech is."

Beyond engagement with readers, it is valued for newsgathering, Michel noted. "Twitter is a very professional social media that you know we use a lot, as it helps journalists find quotes and contact people they might never see in person," he wrote. "It is also a good way to get breaking stories as soon as they happen. Journalists often use twitter personally to show the audience that they are humans. It enhances the likability of some journalists and plays a key role in how they interact with their audience."

In a similar manner, news organizations use social media for name brands. *The New York Times* is one of the best-known brands in news. It uses Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Reddit, and e-mail for readers to share stories. *The Washington Post* does much the same, listing Facebook, e-mail, Instagram, Pinterest, and Twitter as ways for readers to share stories. Further, both newspapers have Facebook pages for discussion, photos, links to stories, and company contact information. Both newspapers offer multiple Twitter account news and information feeds that include news, weather, opinions, and recent stories. *The Times* offers followers accounts for specific sections such as arts, books, world news, travel, music, and politics. And each has individuals on staff with account feeds devoted to their specialties that are read by thousands of people. *Times* fashion director and critic Vanessa Friedman, for example, has almost 200,000 followers to her professional account, where she posts her own views, numerous runway videos, still fashion photos, relevant retweets, and links to her stories.

Perhaps it goes without saying, but we can find similar patterns with large and small news organizations around the world. This is the way social media today are being used to boost readership and interests of readers in the work of these news companies.

A Hockey Writer Establishes her Brand

Erin Brown, correspondent, *The Hockey News*

National Hockey League writer Erin Brown has found social media to help her promote her work and build her brand as a sportswriter. The University of Miami senior lecturer in journalism writes for *The Hockey News*. Here's how she uses social media to develop her brand as a hockey writer:

> A successful brand requires a clear mission and consistency in the actions that support it. It definitely takes a long time to establish. Because my social feed doesn't go through an editor, I've set a number of guidelines for myself to follow when using social media.
>
> The first bullet point in any journalist's mission should be authenticity. If an audience perceives someone as fake, how can they trust the information you are presenting? I do this by sticking to the subject I cover. My audience follows me for hockey-related news, not what I ate for breakfast. I'll

occasionally toss out a fun, unrelated post and rarely a personal post. It's subtle reminder there is a person on the other side of the screen. But otherwise, I aim to give people what they follow for.

I try to stick with a writing style, which taps into principles proven to work across media: inverted pyramid, succinct writing, even use of AP style. I make an effort to include hashtags and handles to extend reach to the community as a whole. The polish can help amplify the signal among the noise. Sometimes a publication will already have social guidelines established for its writers to follow. For instance, you may not be permitted to share news from the competition or promote products. I generally stick to these even if I am not contractually obligated.

Finally, always remember to treat your social presence as a way to drive conversions, not be the endpoint for your content. Social platforms may be great to grow an audience and promote work, but you are always subject to their rules and algorithms. Likes and shares may help amplify your voice, but those metrics benefit the platform, not you, the user. At a minimum, set up a Web site where you can have full control over your content and metrics. If you can, use your handle as the domain name (or consolidate your accounts under one name).

A former colleague, Rick Menning, left corporate media after 30-plus years and established CT Sports Blitz, a not-for-profit publication which focuses on women's sports in Connecticut. He recently tweeted a story he wrote about the Little League Girls Softball championship. Less than 24 hours later, he tweeted again that the story garnered nearly 1,000 visits, more than what he'd see as an editor for a major metropolitan newspaper. At the very least, Rick knows he has an audience for this coverage based on the direct engagement with his story. But now he can dig deeper into the analytics and take informed steps to fine-tune and grow his site.

Yes, setting up a web site can involve a little more cost and work, but think of it as owning a home as opposed to renting an apartment. As social platforms come, go, and evolve, readers will always know where to find you. (Personal communication to author, July 18, 2022)

There are both plusses and minuses in using social media to promote your feature writing work. The 2021 Columbia University study that was discussed earlier offers these:

- Journalists see online abuse as the cost of practicing audience engagement via social media but feel that newsroom social media policies reflect their managers' focus on the public's perception of their organizations rather than on the public's harassment of their journalists.

- Journalists are encouraged to be "active" and "authentic" social media users, yet many of their newsroom social media policies offer little guidance or support for when journalists subsequently face personal, aggressive attacks.
- Journalists believe their newsroom social media policies to be primarily focused on maintaining organizational credibility, specifically by discouraging journalists from sharing anything on social media that could compromise the perceived objectivity of the outlet as a whole.
- Journalists feel their newsroom's social media guidance is unhelpfully ambiguous and unequally enforced.
- Women journalists and journalists of color see newsroom social media policies as negatively affecting them in two ways: They feel insufficiently protected from the abuse they were more likely to receive, and unfairly singled out for using social media in ways their managers claim undercuts their organization's professed neutrality (Nelson, 2021).

Social Media Use Standards

We need to be concerned about what we post. The concern is both for legal reasons and for public relations purposes. Posting the wrong content, such as content without permission, can create legal issues. Posting content that is embarrassing will create image problems for you as writer and your news organization. Care must be taken with the use of social media, especially because there are no editing filters that exist in traditional news distribution processes. In other words, you post directly without an editor's supervision.

The Independent Press Standards Organisation (n.d.), the group that regulates most of the United Kingdom's newspapers and magazines, has published guidelines for use of information found in social media. Many similar professional groups such as the global Associated Press news service (https://www.ap.org/assets/documents/2022_social-media-guidelines.pdf) have created their own handbooks for using social media in reporting and distributing content. Many can be downloaded as pdfs. In its guidelines, IPSO offers: "This guidance is for people who are concerned about how a newspaper or magazine has used information or pictures from social media. This includes Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, as well as online forums, blogs, and other similar websites. This guidance gives advice about the rules which newspapers and magazines must follow when publishing this information and what we can do to help if you are concerned about these issues."

IPSO presents seven main points for UK journalists. You can download the pdf at https://www.ipso.co.uk/media/1510/social-media-public.pdf. The key points:

- When you put information onto social media, you are putting it into the public domain for other people to view. Unless your posts are protected by privacy settings, anyone, including journalists, can see them.
- Most social media websites allow you to restrict what you put into the public domain by allowing you to change your privacy settings.
- Journalists are normally allowed to publish photos, comments, and information from social media profiles, forums, or blogs if there are no privacy settings protecting them and they do not show anything private.

- Journalists may publish information about you which is in the public domain. This may have been put there by you or someone else via social media.
- Journalists may use social media to get in touch with you, to gather information or to check facts.
- Journalists must always consider whether publishing information taken from social media might intrude on your grief or privacy.
- Journalists should not publish information which is about a child's welfare without parental permission, or which might identify a victim of a sexual offence, without the permission of that person (IPSO, n.d.).

Like IPSO, the international news service The Associated Press is concerned about professional standards and ethical uses of social media by its news team, including writers and editors. In its guidelines, five primary standards are offered:

> The use of social media by AP's journalists is held to the same high standards as reporting, communication, and distribution over any other medium. Those standards include, but are not limited to: (Associated Press, 2022a)
>
> - Avoiding expressions of opinion on contentious issues, even in supposedly password protected conversations.
> - When publishing to AP's branded accounts, staffers should get explicit permission from a senior manager before distributing third-party copyrighted material.
> - Not disseminating rumors and unconfirmed reports, and attributing information.
> - Carefully verifying information and content before it is distributed.
> - Transparently correcting errors on all platforms on which the erroneous material was distributed.
>
> AP journalists are encouraged to maintain accounts on social networks, and must identify themselves in their profiles as being with AP if they use the accounts for work in any way.
>
> (Associated Press, 2022a)

It is worth noting that numerous professional organizations are beginning to include discussions about handling social media in their codes of professional ethics. It is an important discussion. In a thorough discussion of this subject, Stephen J.A. Ward, an internationally recognized media ethicist, author, and educator, is distinguished lecturer in Ethics at the University of British Columbia. He offers a summary of the challenge of social media use facing writers: "Many news organizations encourage their reporters to use social media to gather information and to create a 'brand' for themselves by starting their own blog, Facebook page, or Twitter account. However, online commenting can put reporters, especially beat reporters, in trouble with their editors or the people they comment about, especially if the news outlet says it provides impartial reporting," Ward (2022) observed. "For example, a reporter who covers city hall may report dispassionately in her newspaper about a candidate for mayor. But on her blog, she may express strong opinions, saying the candidate is an

unlikeable and incompetent politician. Such comments would give the candidate cause to complain about the lack of impartiality of the reporter. The ethical challenge is to develop social media guidelines that allow reporters to explore the new media world but also to draw reasonable limits on personal commentary."

Final Advice about Privacy

For many of you, it is not necessary to remind you to think about and review your privacy settings for your social media accounts. For personal accounts, it is essential for safety. For too many individuals, including feature writing students and professional writers, personal data has been located and mined for both commercial and illegal use. We should all be familiar with data mining with social media but need to be aware of criminal activity as well. Information we post can be used to find people and to commit serious crimes ranging from financial to violence against persons. Think about what we reveal to others: geographic locations, our health, our religious identification, our sexual orientation, our places of education and work, our relationships, and our appearance. We live in an exciting era with online resources at our fingertips, but we must exercise caution.

These tools are extraordinarily valuable for finding sources and information for writers. But flip that coin over. We must be aware about what we are volunteering on our accounts and how it might be used. And it might not be used only in advertising and marketing. The privacy hazards are real. People, especially young women, have been tracked and crimes committed against them based on open social media information. Be careful.

For professional and writing-related accounts like those we have been discussing who use social media to promote their work, it is equally important to review the account privacy settings to make sure information that the content you wish to be public is not protected and is open for view.

It might take a little time to do much of this, especially with numerous accounts on numerous platforms, but it is advice worth following.

Chapter 6

Interviewing and Observation

For many feature writers, interviewing seems to be the essence of news reporting. For others, it might be using their heightened observational skills. The best feature writers, and the best storytellers, use both abilities for successful feature stories. *The New York Times* recently asked Montana photojournalist and Bozeman resident Janie Osborne to tell the story of tiny Fishtail, Montana's general store. Fishtail, with just a small number of residents, has a remarkable and wildly popular store that has become an attraction in itself, drawing people to drive 20 miles each way off I-90 to visit. It is the state's oldest store. Osborne talked with the owner, her stepson, the store's manager, regular customers, miners who work nearby and get their breakfasts there, cowboys and ranchers who also eat there, and one-time visitors. She also spent a lot of time observing people and looking at the items on the shelves. Osborne shot beautiful images to help tell the story and began it this way:

> *My husband probably thought I had found someone else. Why else would I keep detouring off Interstate 90 to a town whose population is smaller than my daughter's high school class?*
>
> *Even though I've lived in nearby Bozeman for 28 years, there's something provocative about Fishtail, Mont., a tiny town with about 250 residents. But it wasn't another lover, and it wasn't the scenic grandeur or sparkling nightlife. The attraction — however unbelievable it may seem — was the Fishtail General Store. If you drive through Fishtail, you can't miss the store: It's one of the two or three businesses in town (depending on whether you count the post office), and it's strikingly quaint.*
>
> *Founded in 1900, the business is Montana's oldest continually open general store. Owned and managed by Katy Martin for the last 22 years, the store is a fixture in this rural community … .*
>
> (Osborne, 2022)

Osborne's story is filled with people. Different kinds of people. She talked to all of them and found a way to bring them into the story to explain the appeal of this unique place, this community foundation, in such a remote place. While she offers these residents and their thoughts about the store, she also describes it in detail in her

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own words for readers. We learn about the hardware store items such as nuts and bolts. We learn about the convenience store fare such as drinks and snacks. We are told about the drug store items such as toothbrushes and tampons. We learn about toy store and pet store items, clothing store items, and camping/outdoors supplies. And we get a good description of the food the store prepares for hungry residents, the coffee that is regionally known, the burritos and other Mexican fare, hamburgers, pizzas, and homemade cookies. Osborne paints a vivid picture.

News Interviewing

What exactly is a journalistic interview?

First, it is important to realize there are many kinds of interviews that extend beyond news gathering. There are job interviews. There are public opinion survey interviews. There are job performance and appraisal interviews. There are medical care assessment interviews. There are legal interviews known as interrogations, investigations, and cross-examinations. You can probably think of even more types and purposes.

Second, it is important to analyze journalistic interviewing. What is it? More than a century ago, journalist and professor Willard Bleyer (1913) said interviewing boiled down to "conversations" in which reporters focused more on what was said than how it was said. But Bleyer noted that some interviewing required getting what was said verbatim. "Interviewing of this type requires great skill and tact and successful interviewers are highly valued" (pp. 44–45).

Research and Interviewing

After you have done your research homework on the subject and learned what you can about it, you must consider the special demands of interviews. Each interview, if done well, should have its own preparation effort, customized for the source.

Most experienced reporters and writers will tell you that preparation is the key to interview success. Although there are no guarantees, preparation makes it more likely that you will get what you need from the exchange. Writer John M. Wilson (1996) pointed to several elements of preparation. First, Wilson said you must know what you need from the interview. He recommended planning and prioritizing questions that you might ask during the interview. Writers should seek anecdotes during interviews because they are such a vital part of feature writing. Freelancer and novelist Joy Lanzendorfer (2008) recommends five steps: research, asking open-ended questions, asking for examples, asking some personal questions, and asking the person you are interviewing if he or she has any further thoughts to share.

There might be a need for numerous interviews for most feature stories. Some writers interview dozens of individuals for a story. There is a mix of types of sources, too, of course. Some are experts or authorities, and some are eyewitnesses. Some are consumers or users, and some are simply typical "people on the street." You use and choose sources based on need for your article.

Writer Pat Broeske is a Southern California-based columnist who strongly believes in doing research and simply digging for information she needs for her assignments that often focus on pop culture and Hollywood celebrities and the entertainment

business. Broeske (1996) offered 15 observations and recommendations about interviewing:

- A single interview can make a big difference.
- Don't overlook the obvious source.
- Don't make assumptions.
- Corroborate information gleaned in an interview.
- Streamline your topic.
- Look beyond the obvious.
- Ask your interview subjects whom else they think you should talk to.
- Let others know what you are working on.
- Don't overlook anything you might have in common with your subject.
- If your story involves conflict, put yourself in the middle of it.
- Take advantage of technology.
- Show what you know.
- Look for cues and clues.
- Be patient.

Geoff Williams (1996), a veteran freelance magazine writer who specializes in interviewing actors and actresses, recommended a moderate amount of preparation, but not too much. He also recommended finding a quiet place to conduct the interview—if this is possible. Even if the interview is done by telephone, he said control is important. Distractions can contribute to bad interviews. Williams said not to be afraid of practicing before a big interview to build confidence and polish approaches. You should write down or type out your questions in advance, each one based on the research you have done. These question lists can serve as a crutch during the interview. They show the sources that you took the time to prepare for the time you have with them. You must remain flexible during the interview to get into other subjects and concerns beyond what your research told you.

There are times when your well-researched questions will wind up only as a jumping-off point. In most cases, the article you are writing will require that you do some detective work to get the information you need to do the article right. A few subjects will give you the luxury to get by without significant research. Your best bet, regardless, is to know where to go to get the answers when you need to get them before you go into an interview.

Types of Interviews

There are at least eight different categories of feature story interviews. You will probably find these are not mutually exclusive categories, with some interviews taking on characteristics of two or more of these:

1 *Spot interviews*: These are interviews that occur without any advance preparation on the part of the reporter. There are many assignments when you will not have enough time, or only a very short time, to prepare questions for a source.
2 *Advance preparation interviews*: These interviews are set up in advance and allow the reporter (and source) to prepare for the session. The major advantage

to this form of interviewing over spot interviewing is the time for research and development of questions and overall strategy for the interview.

3 *Background interviews*: For many stories, some interviews must be conducted to collect information to prepare for still other interviews. These interviews may never be aired or published, but they play an important role by providing a first layer of information for the story.

4 *Telephone interviews*: There is great dependence on the telephone for interviews by all reporters. Newspaper, magazine, and online news interviewers use the telephone for time and travel savings on less important interviews. These interviews might be used to qualify a source for a story or to obtain background information for another interview. Of course, some sources may be unwilling to be interviewed on camera and prefer only to assist the reporter by telephone.

5 *Video interviews*: Technology today allows for interviews conducted via video meeting and discussion systems such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, FaceTime, and similar online services. These became widely popular during the COVID-19 pandemic and are now in wide use. These have all the speed and convenience of telephone interviews but add the video dimension, usually a head view, and can easily be recorded.

6 *Text message and e-mail interviews*: With the popularity of text messaging services with smartphones and computers, both text messages and e-mail messages are an easy way to communicate with sources. While these have obvious limitations, they offer speed and convenience for obtaining the most basic information from sources.

7 *Q & A interviews*: Question-and-answer interviews, often called Q & A interviews, are published or broadcast as the full text or full interview. Often these are edited for length and time but generally follow the chronological plan of the original interview. Magazines have often used Q & interviews, but they are rarely used in newspapers today. Q & A interviews on radio and television news programs are seldom used because they often take more time than can be afforded with the additional time given to questioning.

8 *Group interviews*: Interviews are sometimes conducted in group situations. This is not always desirable but may occur by request of the source or sources. There can be one reporter and several sources or, of course, several reporters and only one source. These may differ from press conferences only in size because press conferences usually permit a restricted form of interviewing to occur. These are not much different in terms of exchanges between a single reporter and the source in group situations.

Preparation for an Interview

Columnist Art Spikol (1987) told *Writer's Digest* readers the two words all reporters need to remember are "be prepared." He argues that "there's no excuse for sounding ill-prepared" (p. 10). Without the right preparation or focus, an interview may waste both your time and your source's time. Interviewing authority Shirley Biagi (1986) agreed, adding "Well-documented research gives you the background you need to ask good questions, to match your interviewee's answers with what your research tells

you. To be a truly good researcher, you can't be satisfied with Just an answer. You must always look until you find the best answer" (p. 44).

When you get that best answer, you can then set up the interview. Most of the time, your research will tell you what direction to take. You should write down or type your questions in advance, each one based on the research you have done. These question lists can serve as a "crutch" during the interview. They also show that you took the time to prepare for the time you have with the source. But you must remain flexible during the interview to move into other subjects and concerns beyond what your research told you if opportunities arise. There are times when your well-researched questions will wind up only as a jumping-off point for an interview.

In many cases, the story you are writing will require that you do some detective work. A few sources will allow you the luxury to get by without significant research. Your best approach, regardless, is to know where to find answers when you need to get them before you go into an interview. After you have done your pre-interview homework, the time arrives to go to the telephone or into the field. Once you have found authoritative sources for your story, your next step is to set up the interview meeting.

The Interviewing Process

Too many good books are written solely about journalistic interviewing to attempt to tell you everything in part of a single chapter. This discussion focuses on interviewing as part of the overall research and reporting process and offers the advice on how you can use interviews for a feature story. After you have done your pre-interview homework, the time arrives to go to the telephone or to go to your source. (Yes, a lot of students and young writers today conduct interviews with messaging tools or with e-mail since it seems so natural, but these approaches always fall short. More on that later.) Assuming you have found the right sources for your story, the next step is to set up a meeting to talk.

Your interpersonal communication skills are put to the test. You should try to relax the person you are talking to and make the experience seem less like an interview and more like a conversation between two people who just met. How is this done? If you can, start by chatting about something neutral. Take a moment to get to know the person. Tell the person about yourself. Let them get to know you and become more comfortable with you. You must judge how much casual conversation is enough. It is obvious that a busy banker is less interested in casual conversation than a relaxed grandfatherly craftsman might be. Remember that you will have different experiences, depending on whether the interview is conducted in person or on the telephone. Although the telephone saves time, you lose the familiarity and depth of detail of being there with the source.

Treat your source as you would like to be treated if you were the source. Dress professionally. Be polite and considerate. Identify yourself. This is especially important if you are conducting an interview by telephone. Explain your purpose and estimate how much time you need. If you plan to use a tape recorder for accuracy and completeness, ask if it matters to the source before you use it. Some state laws require it, especially if it involves a telephone conversation. Remind the source that you are also going to be taking notes during the interview. Because getting information is your goal, always be certain of the information you are getting during your interview,

regardless of whether it is in person or on the telephone. Verify spellings and the meaning of technical terms. Ask a second time if necessary. Follow up the responses with questions designed to clarify, such as "why?" Don't be afraid to show you don't know something.

These context and verification elements of an interview are quite important, said magazine editorial consultant and former *BusinessWeek* Senior Editor John Campbell. Campbell (1993) believed context should be made clear when questioning a source. This can be done as part of the questioning, such as prefacing a question with a brief factual statement. Verification is equally significant, Campbell said, because "you must understand not just what the interviewee said, but what he really meant to say" (p. 31).

Interviewing in-person on the "street" for an article has its own problems. Many people resist strangers, especially ones with notebooks. The late Kevin McManus (1992), who worked as a reporter for *The Washington Post* writing features about quirky activities, recommended avoiding the outdoors (people prefer indoor situations). He also believed that writers should take time to warm up people and should record the interview. He said we must invest the time and avoid quick-hit efforts. McManus also recommended that writers find an escort— someone from the neighborhood, the business, or school—and that they use a sign or, in large group situations, use poster board to make a sign to tell people they want to talk. Writers should develop a thick skin, he added, and not let refusals from strangers to do spot interviews bother them.

Because many interviews during the research process are vital to the article you write, it is often wise to take an audio recorder with you. In fact, some professional writers use two recorders to guard against the failure of one of the devices. However, as already noted, be sure your source knows you are recording the interview. At the same time, you should continue to take notes as you would normally because your notes will help you in finding quotes on the recording later during the writing process. Susannah Hutcheson, a freelance writer and former publisher and editor in Kansas, said she depends on her audio recorder for accuracy. "My interviews are taped, as is my practice because it keeps me from misquoting a subject and could help me if I ever had to go to court" (Personal communication to author, April 27, 1993).

John Campbell (1993), who has served as editorial director for Hearst Business Publishing Group, said interviews are best if you give a little to get a little. He believed the interview should be kept conversational and not overly rigid and organized. Let the interview flow naturally, he argued. Talk to your source; don't just question him or her. This helps to establish rapport, allows a chance to test your ideas more effectively, and it gives some feedback to the source to ensure his or her involvement in future requests. This is what he called an informal "payback" for their involvement this time around by letting the source know how he or she has helped you.

Steps in the interviewing process have evolved as experienced journalists have tried techniques, refined them, and passed them along to younger colleagues. There are a dozen important stages to the complete and successful interview:

- Determine the reason and purpose of the interview in the context of the story assigned.
- Research the interview subject and source.

- Set up the interview with the source.
- Set the interview strategy and develop key questions to ask the source.
- Meet the interview source and set the atmosphere of the interview by breaking the ice.
- Establish your source's confidence in you and measure your source's credibility and reliability.
- Ask opening questions.
- Ask basic information questions.
- Ask tough and sensitive questions.
- Conclude the interview.
- Assess the interview; review notes and recordings.
- Decide whether there is a need to re-interview this source.

Controlling the Interview

A key interview element is control. Shirley Biagi (1986), a journalism professor at California State University, Sacramento, is the author of more than 200 magazine articles and four books. She stresses the importance of control. "In an interview … the interviewer causes the discussion to happen and determines the direction of the questioning" (p. 6). Control is a critical element of interviewing that distinguished it from normal human conversation. Now you should consider how to establish control of the interview. Generally, there are four types of control to consider:

1 *Environment*: Often where the interview occurs can make a significant difference in the success of the interview. A reporter may prefer a neutral location for some interviews, if only because it reduces interruptions and other distractions.
2 *Subject*: Some sources will attempt to direct the interview away from the original subject when it becomes apparent that the subject is embarrassing or otherwise disagreeable.
3 *Direction of questioning*: If you have prepared questions in advance, this may reduce the likelihood that you will drift from the original purpose of your interview into some other appealing subject. Your source may try to change the line of questioning, also.
4 *Form of answers received*: Reporters must retain control of responses gathered in an interview. This means listening carefully to answers, asking for clarifications if needed, and following up with second and third questions if answers are unsatisfactory for any reason. Some expert sources used for television news stories will talk in difficult-to-understand terms that require explanation. Follow-up questions may elicit better responses that can be aired.

Dynamics of Conversation

Your interpersonal communication skills are put to test during a news interview. You should try to relax the person you are talking to and make the experience seem less like an interview and more like a purposeful conversation between two people, start who just met.

How is this done? If you can, start by chatting about something neutral and nonthreatening. Take a moment to get to know the person. Tell the person a little about yourself. Let the source get to know you and become more comfortable-and confident-with you. But you must judge how much casual conversation is enough. It is obvious that a busy banker would be less interested in casual conversation than a relaxed grandfatherly craftsman might be. Always use time wisely. That busy banker might agree to the interview if it needed. takes only 15 minutes. The craftsman might not care how much time is needed.

Biagi (1986) recommended that during the interview you should relax and let your source do the talking. Simply bite your tongue if you are inclined to talk too much or interrupt before someone finishes answering your question. Biagi said writers should display empathy and concentrate on what the source is saying. She also mentioned that it helps your story if you note gestures and expressions by sources, as well as their physical characteristics.

It is also helpful during in-person interviews to look around the room when you get the chance – to learn more about the person if the interview is on your subject's turf such as a home or office. Biagi also cautioned beginning reporters to watch for sudden shifts in the direction of the interview. This refers to control. And, she suggested, be prepared to get away from the questions you developed if something more interesting arises.

Remember when you are winding down the interview to make certain you know how to find the person if you need to conduct a follow-up interview. Get a telephone number. It may not always be the same place as the original interview. And double check critical information from the original interview.

That is how one interview might take place: Most stories require that you repeat this process. Seldom can you get a complete picture of a situation by depending on one interview and one source. This is called a one-source story and most editors and journalism professors don't like them. Unfortunately, it is the mistake made by many inexperienced student reporters. There is always more than one point of view and one side to a feature story. It is your responsibility to find and report about the others, too.

What else should you do? Treat your source as you would like to be treated. Dress professionally. Be polite and considerate. Identify yourself. Explain your purpose and how much time you want. Getting information is your goal, so always be certain of the information you need during your interview, regardless of whether it is gathered in person, on the telephone, through instant messaging, or by e-mail. Verify spellings and the meaning of technical terms. Ask something a second or third time if necessary. Follow the responses with questions designed to clarify, such as open quotation "why?" Don't be afraid to show you don't know something. In fact, for some sources, this can be helpful.

Shirley Biagi (1986) supports the conversational approach. She recommended that during the interview you should relax and let your source do the talking—simply bite your tongue if you are inclined to talk too much or interrupt before someone finishes answering your question. Biagi also said you should display empathy and concentrate on what your source is saying. She also said it makes a difference if you note gestures and expressions by your source, as well as his or her physical characteristics. It is helpful, of course, during in-person interviews to look around the room when you get

the chance—to learn more about the person. Biagi cautioned beginning writers to watch for sudden shifts in direction of the interview. And, she said, be prepared to get away from the questions you developed if something more interesting arises.

Experienced professionals also recommend that you remain firm and in control while using the conversational approach. Be honest and do not pretend to be something you are not. Being prepared through research is one way to accomplish that. Keep your composure. Relax. This is a natural outgrowth of knowing your material going into the interview. Mixing easy and tough questions will vary the pace and intensity of the interview, also, giving respites to both you and your source, but be sensitive. If you can prepare question lists in advance, keep this in mind as you order the questions (Bottomly, 1991; Ritz, 1993).

Clearly, the telephone is the most convenient method of interviewing. It is indispensable when working on a feature article. Although an in-person interview can yield much richer information and depth of detail, often time or expense will not permit it. A good feature writer needs to refine his or her telephone interviewing skills. Minneapolis feature writer Steve Perlstein offered a tip from his decade of experience as a journalist: "I can't stress how important it is to sound *relaxed* on the phone. Remember, interview subjects either that like you or are intimidated by you because you are writing about them—you are in control. Even when someone is hostile, that's because they feel they don't have the upper hand and they need to get it. Always have your questions written down, so in case someone is short with you, you always have something else to move on to without foundering. That contributes to your air of knowledge, your control of the interview. Without that, you'll almost never get the information you need" (Personal communication to author, January 15, 1998).

Pauline Bartel (1992), who has written freelance articles for numerous national magazines such as the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Mademoiselle,* said organization is the key to efficient use of time for interviews. There is a risk that a disorganized interviewer can spend too much time on interviews and post-interview review of notes and tapes. To save time, she recommended setting up advance appointments, using the telephone as much as possible, tape recording often, and clustering interviews around the same topic.

Some of the most interesting and readable feature articles are often based on very interviews that were difficult to set up and complete. Freelance writer Toni Wood (1993), who has written as a staff writer for the *Kansas City Star* and for national magazines, strongly recommended putting in the effort to get tough interviews. "Compelling nonfiction is often based on intimate losses, victories, or mistakes. But learning to draw those stories from people is an art. It requires that you ask tough, personal questions with compassion, patience, persuasion, and tenacity" (Wood, 1993, p. 28). Here is Wood's list of 10 useful recommendations for successfully completing a tough interview:

- Watch your body language and tone of voice.
- Start the conversation in neutral territory.
- Recording equipment can be frightening.
- React to what you hear.
- Slow down as you move to the sensitive territory.
- Don't rush to fill gaps in conversation.

- Pose the most challenging questions with simplicity and be direct.
- Take time in developing a relationship with the source.
- There may be source resistance, so be ready and make space for it.
- Try to keep a professional distance and don't meltdown emotionally.

Remember the value of follow-up questions as well. Often a source will give a partial answer to your question or may offer a response that is not completely understandable. Be prepared to ask follow-up questions such as "can you explain that better?" or "give me an example of what you mean" or "I'm not sure I understand. Can you expand a little on what you just said?"

When you are winding up the interview, make certain you know how to find your source later if you need to conduct a second, or follow-up, interview. Get a telephone number. It may not always be in the same place as the first interview. Remember to double-check critical information before you leave or hang up the telephone.

How Sources Experience It

What's it like to be a news source? Few journalists have undergone the experience themselves, but it might impact how you conduct interviews. Many writers do not consider a source's point of view. It is a rude awakening to the impact that journalists have on people when a journalist becomes a source. Journalists must be particularly sensitive to their sources and how they react to having a writer present, taking down their words on paper or with a digital recorder.

First, remember there are two kinds of sources. One has never dealt with a reporter before. These are victims or eyewitnesses for example the other type of source has experience in dealing with reporters. It might be helpful to know whether your source has ever been interviewed by a journalist. You can ask. There may be anxieties and fears and inexperienced sources that you must calm. For some sources, being interviewed by feature writer is about as appealing as sitting in a hot car in rush hour traffic.

Sources will be concerned about your abilities as a journalist. They will want to be reassured that you can do the job well. This means getting the information right, first and foremost. You can give them clues that you will do it well by writing down information, by recording it, and by asking clarification questions. You can also help ease the uncomfortable sources anxiety by telling the source a little about your own background and professional experience.

Another helpful technique is to tell your sources what you're doing and why they are important to the story for some assignments, this may tip your hand, but for most stories it does not matter. It helps by allowing the source to learn about your goals and motivations for the interview.

For interviews with experienced sources, you have a different set of concerns. Sources who had dealt with reporters on previous occasions may have a preconceived notion about you, based on those experiences if the earlier experiences have generally been positive, this helps you but if they've been negative, you have ground to be made up. Let's face it, student journalists carry a lot of baggage of other student journalists when they do an interview. How can you tell? Usually, you will get clues during the early moments of the interview. Sources may even caution you of their wariness. Some skeptical sources may also record the interview to intimidate you.

If you encounter a source who does not trust you, the job becomes more challenging. You must establish your own professional abilities and skills perhaps by reviewing your own experience or by reminding your source of a recent story you did that he or she may have seen.

Sources may worry about several things in the interview process. They worry about being made to look bad. They worry they will not be treated fairly. They also worry about whether the information you are given will be accurate when it becomes part of the story. They worry about being misquoted – that is, they worry about being quoted in a manner that is misleading, incomplete, or just erroneous. Sources worry about bias and unfairness in stories in which they will appear. And they worry about complications at work or at home that may occur from the story. You must be sensitive to all these concerns and do your best to alleviate any fears that are expressed or otherwise perceived.

Creating Interview Questions

You have selected your subject and source and have done your research homework, then you are ready to develop questions. This should always be done in advance. There are two stages to consider: (1) writing and asking the questions, and (2) ordering the questions.

Writing and Asking Interview Questions

Writing and asking questions is considered by many professional writers to be an art form. The truly skillful interviewers can develop the right questions to ask. Your first consideration is to *decide what you want to ask*. This process can be a form of "brainstorming" in which you just write an outline or list of topics that need to be covered. Then convert each item into a question or series of questions. When this is completed, decide the order of your questions.

Question formulation is very important. Placing these questions on your laptop or your smartphone screen is even more important. The better prepared you are, the more positively a source will respond. Question formulation enhances your credibility as an interviewer. There are many ways to ask questions. You can ask what are commonly called "open-ended" questions or you can ask "closed-ended" questions:

Open-Ended Questions

These questions are not limited in any form or fashion and do not lead your source toward a particular response. These questions are typically very general in the type of information they probably will elicit from the source. Example: "What do you think about plan for construction of new condominiums near the wetlands at Jackson Corners?"

Closed-Ended Questions

These questions often propose a possible range of answers for your source. Thus, these questions are more specific in the type of information they will elicit from the

source. Example: "What do you think should be done about the plan to build new condominiums near the wetlands at Jackson Corners? Should the county allow the developer to build, require the developer to conduct another impact study, or should the county ban all construction? What should be done?"

While preparing questions, do not overlook the need for questions that gather the most basic facts: how do sources spell their names? Addresses? Ages? There are other basic questions that follow the general who, what, when, where, why, and how model. Perhaps, however the most important questions from the 5 W's and H model are *how* and *why*.

Ordering the Questions

The order of questions is a serious consideration for any interview. Most feature writers begin interviews with easy icebreaker questions, which ease tension and tend to get everyone comfortable. These questions should be given full effort to be timely and useful. Tough and more sensitive questions should come near the middle or end of your interview, if there is no more logical place. This allows you to get as much information from the source as possible before the circumstances of the interview change because of the more difficult questions.

At the beginning of an interview, it might be helpful to use a filter question or two. These questions permit writers to determine the qualifications of a source to answer certain questions. Was the person an eyewitness or not? Does the person know much about a particular style of weaving? Simple questions about professional or educational background or other general experience might just save time for everyone. They can also establish that this is the right person for the story, too.

Good interview question ordering, like a good feature story, needs to be connected. Use transitions to let your source know that you are changing direction. This gives the interview a sense of continuity. These transitions can be casually conversational in nature, but they alert your source to a change in the material being covered. Simple statements or phrases can do the job: "now I want to talk to you about … " or "now let's turn our attention to … ."

Often it is necessary to preface the question with the background. For unusual subjects, very recent developments, which your source may or may not know about, or for explanation of your purpose, it is often helpful to your source to begin a question with an explanatory statement. In this example, you may be interviewing a criminologist: "As you may know, there was another murder this morning in the East Bay neighborhood. That was the third shooting death of a known opioids dealer in a week. Do you think there is a vigilante-style killer stalking the streets?"

At the same time, with your more detailed questions ready to go, you must be able to probe into the source's answers. Thus, when writing questions, you need to write follow-up questions – or, at least, need to be prepared to ask them extemporaneously – to get the needed information. You can follow up and probe by asking to clarify information, by withholding response and waiting to force the source to continue the answer, or by responding with natural excitement that could encourage further discussion.

Remember your ultimate audience for your story what will readers want to know and hear? Can you persuade a source to explain a complicated subject, such as

something in science or technology, in better terms that your audience will understand?

There are problem areas and interview questioning. You should try to avoid *leading questions* and *loaded questions*. Leading questions strongly suggest answers and many sources accept the suggestions. Loaded questions are even more dangerous because they often contain the reporter's opinion or point of view, suggest responses, and take an accusatory tone. Both should be avoided, of course.

Keep in mind that inexperienced interviewers often ask *double-barreled questions*. These questions are really two questions built into one and often will confuse your source. At best, your source might answer both, but most often the source answers only the second one. When you find yourself with one of those, take it apart and ask for each part separately.

Finishing Up

There are very effective and very ineffective ways to wrap up an interview. Perhaps the most effective manner is to give the source a chance to speak without a question. This can be essential to many feature writers and how they talk to sources. A typical closing question might be "Is there anything else you might want to add?" or "Did I overlook anything?" or "Is there anything more that you wish to tell me about?"

Asking Tough And Sensitive Questions

There will be interviews for some features that require you to ask tough or difficult questions. These can be challenging because you may feel awkward asking questions. Or your source may not want to answer the questions. They may involve sensitive or personal subjects.

These situations often occur when you must discuss controversial matters. But you must be willing to ask the tough questions, regardless of whether they are planned or asked in the natural flow of the interview. These questions can cause the most problems in an interview situation. Sometimes it is helpful to distinguish between "tough" questions and "dirty" questions. Tough questions are necessary, but dirty questions have no purpose other than embarrassing the person with whom you're talking. Most professional feature writers don't go there.

Listening Skills

Listening is one of the most important skills a journalist can develop. To be a strong interviewer, you must be a strong and focused listener. Think about conversations with your friends: we all want active listeners when we talk and tell stories. An interviewer can play this role, as well as many others, during an interview. Listening effectively is your most important responsibility. In today's age of distractions and short attention spans, it is essential to teach yourself to eliminate the most basic causes, such as cell phones, and focus on the person speaking.

Good listening requires concentration. It's not the place for a short attention span. As an interviewer, you must focus on what is being stated. Forget the other things on

your mind, don't be distracted by text message pings, or anything else. As you listen, maintain as much eye contact with your source as possible. Focus.

Many feature writers take detailed notes during their interviews. But they also record their interviews. It is important to pause while taking notes from time to time to maintain eye contact. Digital audio recorders and the easy-to-use apps available on smartphones such as Voice Memos, Record It, and Voice Recorder, have reduced this pressure, but we cannot be tempted to pay more attention to the recorder than our source.

Most experienced feature writers will tell student journalists that listening is a difficult discipline to master because there is a great temptation to talk with the source and become too involved in the conversation. But these experienced reporters have learned to be quiet, not to fill silent moments, not to interrupt, and to provide non-verbal cues such as eye contact that they are paying attention.

Taking Notes

Another interviewing skill to learn is how and when to take notes. We cannot depend entirely on a digital recorder or smartphone. They can fail. Batteries run down. The best solution is to do both. Taking notes is often a matter of several personal preferences but start with a pocket-size notebook. The ones common in many newsrooms are four inches wide by eight inches tall with spiral binding. Some reporters prefer to take notes on a laptop, a tablet, or their smartphones. This depends on how fast and how accurately you can type. Typing will work very well for telephone interviews, of course. Just tell your source on the other end of the line what you are doing to avoid confusion and the suspicion that you're not listening and doing something else.

When it comes to taking notes, it makes sense to develop some sort of personal shorthand. In this way you don't have to write full words and use shortened word variations and abbreviations. As you become more experienced, you will develop your own system that is probably a combination of different techniques. It is faster and more accurate --- if you can interpret your notes.

When preparing for an interview, you can either type out your questions on your computer or smartphone screen, or write them where you will take notes, leaving space for responses. You'll get better at it with more practice, but speed and accuracy are essential to be an accurate and thorough note-taker.

Using Digital Recorders

Digital audio recorders and recording apps on smartphones are modern-day tech tools that have become critical to all writers. We use them either within our smartphones or as separate handheld devices. It is professionally wise to record an interview. Use it for the story and then save it somewhere safe. Ideally, taking some notes to go with the recording will help provide an index to the recording. This is particularly helpful for long interviews.

Digital recordings assure greater accuracy and thoroughness. The fact that there are many small and inexpensive (as low as $35) digital recorders on the market today should be an incentive to own one in addition to the smartphones that most writers use. This may be preferred to using a cell phone for everything --- and running down

the battery quickly. Today's devices, whether separate or part of a smartphone, require a very little technical expertise. And the digital files that they generate can be easily stored on a hard drive, separate server, or in the cloud. There is a risk of taking fewer notes and becoming dependent on them, however. And these devices can fail. In fact, experienced feature writers will often use two recording devices at the same time for the most important interviews to avoid the unpleasant surprise of a recording that does not exist.

Another problem with audio and video recordings is intimidation. Recording can cause a source to refuse to talk or be less candid when the recording is underway always let your source know that you are recording an interview. In some parts of the world, such as some states in the United States, it is illegal to record a conversation without notifying all individuals involved. In other places, at least one party must know about the recording to avoid violation of wiretapping laws. And it can get even more complicated when interstate calls are involved. Always check your local state or regional authorities for rulings and laws that impact recording for a story. At the very least, talk to your editors, professors, or general counsel of the organization for which you are working. This applies to recording both in-person, telephone, and computer-based video interviews (such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, and Apple's FaceTime).

Creating, managing, transcribing, and storing recordings can be time-consuming. By this, it is meant that listening to an interview several times after it has been conducted, or even transcribing an interview recording, can take hours. This will not work for features on short deadlines, but it is very helpful if you have plenty of lead time.

A few final tech suggestions: First, learn how to use your recording device and test it to make sure it works before you do an interview with it. Second, make sure there are fresh batteries or fresh charges in your device. Carry extra batteries or cables for charging for all interviews. Don't expect to have access to electricity where you conduct the interview. And last, when a digital file from an interview is no longer needed for the story, don't delete it. Rename the file clearly to identify the name of the person, place, and date, and maybe the story keywords, and store it in a safe place such as a portable hard drive, a thumb drive, a newsroom server, or in the cloud.

Mastering Telephone and Video Interviewing

With everyone armed with a smartphone today, having strong telephone and video interviewing skills are a must. In-person interviews are almost always going to yield better information, but sometimes we must use telephones and other tools to complete an interview when time is short. You'll always have different interview experiences when using telephones and e-mail when compared to something done in person. For many reporters today, the telephone will be the first choice, but Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, FaceTime, and other video talk tools run a close second.

Although telephones will save us time and money, we lose the familiarity of being there in the same room with a source. We lose detail from first-hand observation. We do not see facial expressions. We cannot observe the environment where this source works or lives. We cannot tell what a person is wearing. For feature writers, this loss of detail it is quite important. And, keep in mind, sources have more control of the

interview. They can put a caller on hold or even hang up without notice. Telephone interviews tend to be shorter and more superficial. And, if possible, use a landline. There is no doubt that landlines are usually clearer and more stable than cell phones. This leads to better accuracy and clarity for everyone involved.

Video calls offer some help. With video from Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, FaceTime and other similar apps, we can get some visual help. We can see facial expressions and appearances, but only if cameras are turned on by the user. But they can be a huge step ahead when it comes to telephone technology when comparing them to landlines and basic cell service.

For successful telephone and video app interviews, try this time-tested advice:

- Always identify yourself at the very beginning of the conversation. Give your full name, identify the organization you represent or explain that you are independent and freelance, and make sure your source knows that he or she is talking to a writer who may use what is said.
- Speak loudly and clearly. Do not talk too fast make sure you have a good, clear connection. For beginners, this is a common mistake. It is even more important when using a cell phone or computer with a slow or unstable Wi-Fi connection. If you don't have a good connection, change locations, and call back. Again, a landline or a digital device connected to an ethernet line is usually more reliable, but there are visual tradeoffs when there is no video.
- Explain the purpose of your call at the beginning. Estimate how much time you will need from this person and tell him or her. Your source may set a time limit, too. Honor that. If the source decides to go longer, be prepared to take advantage if needed.
- Reduce the amount of time spent on casual discussion in the interest of time.
- If you plan to record, be sure to ask your source if he or she agrees to it on the recording itself. This way you have a record of their permission.
- As the interview proceeds, be sure your source knows that you are taking notes on your computer. He or she may hear the keyboard clicks or see you typing if there's video with the call. You don't want your source thinking you are doing two things at once.
- Most smartphones have a hands-free or speaker option, so use it. If you have a holder for your phone or video device, use it. This will free both hands for typing or notetaking.
- Repeat questions as needed. Rephrase them if it helps. If a source does not answer a question, ask it again in a reworded form.
- Ask your source to repeat answers if needed. This helps you understand what was said and, of course, helps you get it right. Ask for spellings on names or technical terms or foreign words. Ask sources to repeat numbers, such as a telephone number, address, or a statistic.
- Take advantage of the telephone and video connection to ask difficult and sensitive questions. Sometimes using a telephone or even video connection makes answering questions like that easier for the source since you're not in the same room.
- Use e-mail and messaging in combination with the telephone and video service. If your source has documents or reports, ask them to e-mail or text message them to

you. Zoom and other similar visual tools have simultaneous text messaging also. Be very careful when giving an e-mail address: Spell it out carefully or text it. Keep reading, there's more on text messaging and e-mail below.

- Always be courteous and polite. Treat people the way you would like to be treated. Don't talk to someone else at the same time, for example. It's just rude. Don't do something else while conducting the interview. Don't permit interruptions. Conduct your interview in a space where you can be alone.
- Respect privacy if someone does not want to use a video service.
- At the conclusion of the interview, go over your notes and make sure you fill in any gaps that might exist. Make a duplicate copy of the digital audio file you may have created. Remember you can record Zoom sessions. Just tell the person you talk to that you want to record it. Zoom also displays a meeting recording message and provides a verbal notice, but courteous writers will ask to be certain.
- Store the recording in a safe place, such as the cloud.

Text Messages and E-mail for Interviews

A relatively new way to gather information from sources, at least compared to the in-person and telephone methods, is smartphone and computer text messaging and e-mail. While Zoom and video meeting tools were mentioned above, they apply here as well. These are convenient and allow for multitasking, but they have shortcomings. They can work well for quick and easy information. We know that. But they can be ignored very easily and don't offer any visual cues unless it is a video meeting or video calling tool. And, perhaps worst of all, we cannot even verify that the person responding is the person you expect. That is easier with the video tools, but not all sources will want to use them.

We need to be careful using text messaging, e-mail, and video meeting tools for gathering information. While handy, it is not ideal. For a feature writer, especially, the cons outnumber the pros when it comes to text and e-mail, but we gain some help with video meeting and talking apps. We may lose detail and description and so much more that the best features are built upon. At their best, text messaging and e-mail can supplement other forms of interviewing, such as clarifying information, double-checking spellings, or confirming direct quotations. Video meeting services and video calling tools are a step better but don't compare to talking to someone in person.

Using Direct Quotations

A person's exact words help a feature story to come to life. Most features are built on people. Profiles. Human interest. Travel. Their words and their identity add credibility to the story. Someone's actual words provide readers and audiences with an exciting dimension not available through paraphrasing or summaries of what was stated.

Feature stories need people and what they have to say. One way we add people to a story is to introduce them and direct quote them. One important part of a feature story is how people are related to the subject of the story. It is also about how it has been said. As a feature writer, you must have a good sense of when to quote and when not to quote. While feature stories depend on direct quotations for the human

element and storytelling, there is a fine line between too little and too much when it comes to direct quotations. Students may be tempted to overquote to fill a story to an assigned length and disguise the lack of sources. That does not work. While it takes experience to find that proper balance, we need direct quotations for these reasons:

- To highlight and support generalizations made in the story.
- To give attention to controversial material in which the wording can be the issue (such as something legal like a court ruling).
- To catch the feel, emotion, and nuances of what people have said or of passages in documents, and to convey the flavor of the person's use of language.
- To highlight exchanges and testimony in trials, hearings, meetings, conversations, and other supporting content.

Using Exact Words

As helpful as direct quotations can be to a writer, there are some basic rules about quotations. First, in much of your feature writing, you will find that direct quotations help backup generalizations made about a person, a place, or a thing. Direct quotations give the story an element of specificity and of reality beyond the perspective of the writer. It means you can let someone else speak in the story, using that person's exact words.

Many experienced feature writers use direct quotations and dialogue to recreate situations to provide the effect of being there – getting to experience history or witnessing a tragedy unfold – through the exact words of the persons who were present. Consider these suggestions when using direct quotations:

- Make certain it is clear in the flow of your story who is speaking. This is especially true if you change focus on people in the story.
- Use past tense for verbs of attribution. Some publications like to use present tense, such as magazines, but for beginners it is safest to use past tense because it is most common.
- Vary the verbs of attribution for direct quotations. Don't always use "said." More descriptive verbs and adverbs will help with the storytelling.
- Be careful with long quotations. If you must use a long direct quotation from a person or from a document, something more than two or three sentences, make certain you have introduced it to the reader and explain what you are doing and why. For long direct quotations, consider breaking the quotation into more than one paragraph.
- Dialogue adds a great deal to any feature story. This, of course, involves quoting two or more people in conversation. Take particular care to make certain who is speaking with each quotation used, especially in long-form stories where these passages can be extended.
- Quote exact words and do not change the words in the quotation. Incorrect grammar can give the reader insight into the personality of an individual.

There seems to be two schools of thought among writers about using exact words and direct quotations. For some journalists, direct quotations should never be changed.

For others, direct quotations can be "cleaned up" for use if the meaning is not changed. In fact, it is not uncommon for sources to tell reporters to do that. As you gain more experience as a feature writer, you will come across sources who may even ask you to clean up their comments for them. As you gain experience, you will recognize when changes are helpful and when they should not be made. For most people, changing quotations means removing out extraneous words and unnecessary common sounds of speech for clarity in meaning.

Keep in mind that exact words are exact words. The use of direct quotation marks tells your reader that you are representing a person's exact words. It is your responsibility to get the comment right, whether it has been edited or not. You must decide whether to clean up a quote or not, but the safest approach is to leave it as it was stated. if it is so difficult to understand that it needs editing, it may be best just to paraphrase and rewrite it.

"Quotes must not be taken out of context," The Associated Press tells its writers in the online *The Associated Press Stylebook* (The Associated Press, 2022b). "We do not alter quotations, even to correct grammatical errors or word usage. If a quotation is flawed because of grammar or lack of clarity, it may be paraphrased in a way that is completely true to the original quote. If a quote's meaning is too murky to be paraphrased accurately, it should not be used. Ellipses should be used rarely and must not alter the speaker's meaning."

Source Attribution

Feature stories can, on occasion, have source attribution problems. There will be times when a source does not want to be identified in a story. This happens less often in feature writing than in other forms of news writing, but it must be dealt with from time to time. There are a variety of ways to identify sources in a feature story. The most preferred manner is on the record, using full name and some form of identification such as where a person lives, where a person might go to school, or where someone works. With college students, we often use year in school, hometown, major, or age.

More and more, because of privacy concerns in the digital era come up, people are requesting anonymity. This must be considered on a case-by-case basis. If there is danger or risk to the source, then we usually grant anonymity and do not use the person's name. We identify with a false name or some other reference. And we explain this to the reader and tell the reader why. For feature stories that involve victims, there is special consideration for their situation. Normally sexual assault crime victims are not identified. This may be required by law but not always.

The Associated Press works hard to attribute all forms of information in its stories, including quotations from sources. "Anything in the AP news report that could reasonably be disputed should be attributed," The Associated Press (2022a) tells its writers. "We should give the full name of a source and as much information as needed to identify the source and explain why the person is credible. Where appropriate, include a source's age; title; name of company, organization or government department; and hometown. If we quote someone from a written document --- a report, e-mail, or news release --- we should say so."

The main point of all this is to reduce the chance of confusion and misidentification of someone named in a feature story. There are other ways to identify people who are quoted than just using name, place of residence, or age. For example, we can identify by place of work, school, church membership and so forth, when common names are involved. We can usually identify someone sufficiently in a story without invading privacy.

Observation in Feature Writing

Do you notice small details? Colors? Smells? Sounds? Even the most ordinary things? What is the breed of the dog next door? Did you look at the license plate number of the car in front of you in traffic? What state or county is it from? Do you remember the styles and brands of clothes that people wear? Do you notice how a room, such as an office or a kitchen, is decorated? Did you notice the title of the book on a person's desk while you were conducting an interview? Colors? Objects? Furniture styles? Noticing details such as these and noting them as part of recordings, such as using video app on a smartphone, or including them in your interview notes, are part of observing. These details can make or break a feature. Readers thrive on details like these.

Observation must be a part of your reporting and writing routine. As a writer, you must learn not to assume anything and, instead, use your observational skills to confirm or refute facts gathered from other techniques such as interviewing and searching documents. For example, a county property record might describe a house one way but driving past it may reveal it to be very different (e.g., unpermitted additions or improvements).

As feature writers, we must observe a great deal. We may watch a meeting take place. We may watch a sports event. We may watch a concert. We may watch a parade pass. We could observe a family in the park. But we also watch serious situations as well, such as what is happening at a crime scene, or a traffic accident, or a natural disaster. We do this so often as journalists, we might just take it for granted. But we shouldn't. For feature writers, noticing the details of events make a major difference in the depth of our storytelling. Think about how much less a story would offer readers if we did not use the details that we gather from observing.

Observing Relevant Details

Observing is seeing. In a journalistic sense, observing should be much more than just seeing. Observing is *sensing*. Sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Observation includes using as many of these senses to gather information for your feature. For some stories, details and description will play a greater role than it will in others. But detail can be an important dimension for all features that you write.

Seeing things around you is the first step in observation. What can you notice in a systematic manner? For example, what is the color of the water and the lake? What is the texture of the material used in the chair? What is the length of a person's hair? What model car is that in driveway? What year is it? Is it an e-vehicle? Hybrid? Gas guzzler? These are details of ordinary objects and scenes that can become an important and telling part of a feature story.

Listening is also part of observation. What sounds do you hear at a person's workplace? What background sounds in his or her office? What conversations in a restaurant? What sort of music plays in the dental hygienist's office? What does a residential neighborhood's traffic sound like? What about that airplane flying low overhead? How do sounds become a part of your story?

Smelling is another part of observation. not everything will have the aroma of a bakery or perfume counter. At a toxic waste dump site that is being cleaned up, can you smell the chemicals? What's your impression? Can the neighbors down the road smell the chemicals? This may be an important part of the feature you're writing about the dump site cleanup and the residents of the nearby neighborhood.

Touching can teach us a lot about objects. The ability to feel an object is an important sense that sometimes is overlooked by writers as a means of gathering information for their story. How rough is a surface? What does the cloth used in a designer's new dress feel like? What does the leather used for the seats in that luxury car feel like? What does a road-rage bullet hole in a car door feel like? How does that new hair product that you tried for a story feel?

One important part of feature writing is setting a scene. This is very similar to what novelists to do when they tell a story. How is this accomplished? First, we must describe the where and when of the scene. This is a simple description of the environment to establish a sense of place. Second, we must develop people in our storytelling by giving them personality and depth, the same way a novelist develops characters. Third, we describe action and interaction. This element shows what happened and how it is relevant to the story. And fourth, we offer meaning by interpreting and explaining the elements of the scene. What's the point? What do these observations mean? In this way we help readers determine the meaning of what is being described.

Observation is an essential tool in gathering information for a feature story. But it is not without problems and flaws. First, we cannot depend on our memory. We need help. For accurate observations to be incorporated into a feature story, we need to take very detailed notes, describe what we see in detail in a digital audio recording, and perhaps shoot video as well.

Keep in mind that people tend to mentally change what they see to be consistent with their own previous experiences. Our sources will experience this and we as writers will experience this. There can be the distortion of perspective. Different points of view can give us different perspectives, or what are different looks at the same thing. From time to time, our own emotional responses can impact our observations. At a particularly horrific scene we visit for a story, we as human beings will react to what we see. It's a good idea to keep this in mind when we write our stories. We cannot remember nor use everything, so focus on what is most important for the story.

When observing, it is important to seek other evidence. This means talk to other people and see what they think. Bottom line: Compare notes with others. Get a second opinion. And a third. While it is often best to observe unobtrusively, feature writers sometimes get involved in the stories that they are writing. By this, you become a participant. A little further below, we discuss participating and observing and we will consider personal experience feature writing in a later chapter.

Observation for Story Research

There are times when a portion of an article can be researched simply by going to a location and looking around. You might be writing a piece on flood damage, and a tour of a flooded area can tell you much more than reading books or talking to people who had previously experienced floods. Your own first-hand observation can add much depth of detail and description to your article. Most of the time, you will combine observation with interviewing and other research skills. You do not need to be a detective, but you cannot be oblivious to what is going on, either. If you find yourself dependent on others for detail and description, you must contend with possible distortions of fact. Thus, the more you see for yourself, the richer will be your article. Most people are simply not accustomed to noting detail as detectives do, and you must train yourself through practice to do it well.

The late author Jacqueline Briskin (1979), a British-born popular novelist who worked in Southern California and whose books sold 20 million copies worldwide, recommended one rather unusual technique that may lend a guiding hand to your observational talents. She suggested that when you are out looking around – touring a museum, for example, to research a story – sometimes your camera can help you with your note-taking. We all have them with us almost all the time. Your smartphone, of course.

Of course, your pictures don't have to be publishable. Yet the approach makes good sense. The detail contained in a picture might just jog your memory or provide the image for a description needed in your article. Briskin called her camera (or any inexpensive pocketsize digital camera, for that matter) her most important research tool. Just consider how a smartphone or a small digital camera might help you capture the color and pageantry of a festival or block party. Both still photos and video will do the job. You might just decide this tool would help you also, especially if you do not plan to write your article right away. In this case, a picture might really be worth several thousand descriptive words --- for your notes. The photographs and videos can be stored on your computer or in the cloud until you no longer need them.

Getting Involved and Observing

The participant form of writer observation is unique because you get directly involved in the story. As a participant, you likely become part of the story and storytelling. This can have certain advantages, such as in travel writing when you relate your unusual travel experiences to readers. Or when you take a cooking class or participate in a coastal cleanup day. Other approaches are more third person-oriented and do not place you into the story.

You can accomplish some research for stories by experiencing an activity yourself. Usually this is research that you simply could not find from other sources. Some serious subjects require it, especially if the article subject involves illegal or, at least, questionable activities. Because sources, when confronted with tough questions about illegal or morally and ethically questionable activities, will almost always deny involvement, you get first-hand knowledge by becoming a participant and witness. However, in addition to being dangerous, these stories present ethical problems because there can be no disclosure that you are a writer. Many professionals

discourage this because they believe it is a form of deception. However, in some cases it may be necessary if it is an important issue. Other professionals feel it is a necessary and legitimate form of information gathering. Ultimately, you and your supervisors must judge that. At the very least, before beginning such research, you should talk to an editor or professor about it.

On less serious feature stories, some excellent feature articles can result from do-it-yourself experiences. One student in Florida, when assigned to write a feature story based on personal experience and participation in an activity, took a flying lesson at a nearby airport and learned the basics of piloting a private plane. Another student took the assignment a step further and jumped out of a plane! She safely took sky-diving lessons, of course, with a licensed instructor. Both experiences resulted in fine first-person feature stories that dependence on another person's descriptions would not produce.

Other stories may be supplemented by participating in one or more activities. A feature article about hospital volunteers might be strengthened if the writer took the time to go through a training program and volunteered for a few hours. But the story would not necessarily stand on observation alone. To make the article more complete, you would also interview veteran volunteers, managers of the program, hospital officials, doctors and nurses, patients, and even a beginning volunteer or two. All this would be beyond the library research with which you started when the story idea was first chosen.

The Story Environment

Each story has an environment. This is the physical space where the story takes place. Some might call it a setting, but it is the location of the action. As a feature writer, you should study the environment of each story so you can establish it for the audience. If you are routinely observing the story's environment, your work will be more complete, and your story writing will be easier.

There will be times when a story can be improved simply by going to its primary location and looking around. Briefly immerse yourself in it. You might be writing a story on flood damage from heavy rains in your town. As a feature story writer perhaps you're focusing on the impact of the floods on residents or businesses. A walk through the flooded area can tell you much more than trying to work the story by telephone. By going to the scene, you will find emergency response workers, government policymakers, residents, volunteers, and insurance adjusters trying to help those who are suffering losses.

Most of the time, however, you will be combining observation with interviewing and other research skills. You do not need to be a detective, but you cannot be oblivious to what's going on, either. If you find yourself dependent on other persons for detail and description, you must contend with their potential distortions, such as exaggeration. Thus, the more you see of that environment yourself, the richer your story will be. Most people are simply not accustomed to noting detail such as a detective might do, and you must train yourself through practice to do it well. Yes, it is work and considerable effort to do it well. But the payoff is also big.

Watching People

When you interview someone, what can you learn just by watching that person? There is often much to be learned if you study the individual. For example, you can focus on his or her body language. His or her interaction with co-workers. Attitude. Conversational tone. Other similar cues will tell you much about this individual without asking a single question. This is one way to study people. If you can, simply watch how this person conducts himself or herself. Study actions and reactions. Study facial expressions. Study gestures.

Also study the physical appearance of the person and what it says about that person. How is the person dressed? Is it formal or casual? What is this person's *style*? Are the clothes being worn expensive or inexpensive? Tailored or off the rack? Cutting-edge or out of style? What else can you determine about a person's appearance that tells you something useful about that person? Notice the individual's behavior. Does the person move slowly or is the person hurried? Is this individual experiencing stress? Is the person emotional? Is the person relaxed?

Take time to notice the environment in which this person works or lives. What can you learn from it? What types of personal possessions are present? What books and other objects are on the shelves behind them? What kinds of items are placed on the walls? If it is a professional person, are there diplomas or certificates prominently displayed? What do they say about the person's credentials? What does it all tell you?

Chapter 7

Descriptive and Color Writing

Imagine experiencing a severe weather disaster. What would it be like for those who must go through it? Think about the 2020 hurricanes. There were 30 named storms and six were major hurricanes. Hurricane Laura was the strongest and most damaging, causing major long-term recovery problems for Louisiana. Do you remember another big one that struck New Orleans in 2005? It was named Katrina. Or think about the severe tornadoes or the flooding that visit our communities on a regular basis. Could you write about it in the aftermath of a storm or natural disaster? Even if you were not present when the storm or flooding struck, could you tell readers what happened? This takes detailed writing, a highly descriptive approach to storytelling. It often requires taking readers to the scene and recreating it.

This is what author and former *Chicago Tribune* reporter Julia Keller did when a deadly tornado swept through tiny (1,300 residents) Utica, Illinois, sometimes called North Utica, located less than 100 miles southwest of Chicago. The storm struck in an April, but Keller took the rest of the year to report about it, her stories appearing in December, to describe the storm's impact on the community. Eight people died. Countless others had their lives changed by the furious winds. Keller wrote a series of three stories that told what happened just prior to, during, and immediately after. She also described the tornado's longer-term effect on the community as months passed. Note the detail of her writing in the first few paragraphs of her first story and how she sets the scene for readers:

> *UTICA, Ill.— Ten seconds. Count it: One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. Ten seconds was roughly how long it lasted. Nobody had a stopwatch, nothing can be proven definitively, but that's the consensus. The tornado that swooped through Utica at 6:09 p.m. April 20 took some 10 seconds to do what it did. Ten seconds is barely a flicker. It's a long, deep breath. It's no time at all. It's an eternity.*
>
> *If the sky could hold a grudge, it would look the way the sky looked over northern Illinois that day. Low, gray clouds stretched to the edges in a thin veneer of menace. Rain came and went, came and went, came and went.*
>
> *The technical name for what gathered up there was stratiform cloud cover, but Albert Pietrycha had a better way to describe it: "murk." It was a Gothic-sounding word for a Gothic-looking sky. A sky that, in its own oblique way, was sending a message.*

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> *Pietrycha is a meteorologist in the Chicago forecast office of the National Weather Service, a tidy, buttoned-down building in Romeoville, about 25 miles southwest of Chicago … .*
>
> (Keller, 2004, p. 1)

Keller, who earned a PhD degree in English literature and who has taught at Princeton, the University of Chicago, and Notre Dame, joined the newspaper staff in 1998. She won the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing for her 5,200-word story and its two companion pieces that were published not long after the disaster occurred. She earned recognition for the way she told the story. Her reporting focused on small details, as you see from the excerpt, which, when put together, portrayed the horror of the storm's victims. She put readers thereby recreating the scene. She talked to dozens of people. She tells readers what she learned by writing with no small point overlooked. In another passage of the same story, she describes several residents of Utica that are part of her story:

> *Mike Miller's lean, lined, mournful face seemed to carry all the family's woes in its crevices. They'd had a lot of hard luck over the years. Money was tight, and Mike's salary from the Illinois Central Railroad never seemed quite able to stretch from one payday to the next, not with all those skinny tow-headed kids to take care of. Debbie Miller had signed on as a cook at Milestone about a year and a half ago, and Ashley and Mike Jr. sometimes came along, too, to wait tables or sweep up, netting a few bucks from Larry.*
>
> (Keller, 2004, p. 1)

Keller's reporting produced the memorable description. It helps us get to know some of the people affected by the storm. Try to picture the moment the tornado appeared to residents who were outdoors. This is how Keller wrote it:

> *At 5:58 p.m., Dena Mallie saw it from her driveway in Peru.*
>
> *As it blossomed darkly, a huge batwing erasing the sky around it, a Utica contractor named Buck Bierbom saw it from his back yard.*
>
> *Rona Burrows saw it. She leaned out the front door at Mill Street Market, where she worked as a cashier, and looked up at the sky.*
>
> *Lisle Elsbury saw it from the alley behind Duffy's.*
>
> *It was a great black mass, a swirling coil some 200 yards wide at the ground--it was wider in the sky--heading northeast at about 30 m.p.h. They looked up and saw it but they thought: No. Couldn't be. Could it?*
>
> *There was a wild beauty to it, a fiercely knotted loveliness that was like nothing they'd ever seen. They could see debris swirling in it, pulled in and out and sucked up and around, frenzied sticks of wood, trees, dirt, other things, everything.*
>
> (Keller, 2004, p. 1)

Throughout this story and the stories following over the next two days, she told readers what happened, what the ten seconds of terror were like for eyewitnesses, and

then, the moments afterward. It was hard work for Keller, who also served as book critic for her newspaper before leaving to write books, but the three stories are compelling reading. Find them on the Pulitzer Prizes Web site section for feature writing (https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/julia-keller).

Readers feel like they were there when the storm struck. Feature stories need to set a scene or establish a mood as an important objective for readers. Keller's story, through her use of rebuilt moments and meticulous description, does this. We, as readers, were not there, but Keller shares these observations to provide a fuller impression that goes far beyond normal breaking news and same-day treatments.

For any story of this type and for many other types of feature stories, your goal may include making the reader "see," "feel," "hear," and "touch" the subject of your writing. You want to create mental images of the person, the place, and the scene. You want to present the opportunity for the reader to use his or her "mental senses"—that is, to imagine the smell, sound, feel, the emotion, the physical appearance, and even the taste of the subject.

This is what descriptive and color writing requires. Features built on this approach are widely used for special and unusual events. This chapter discusses these approaches and outlines the best ways to use the technique in writing features.

This type of writing requires great concentration and highly tuned observational skills. An alert writer will notice the colors, odors, the noise, feel, and other elements of a setting and put the reader in the middle of it by describing these in depth. You accomplish this by using precise adjectives and adverbs, as well as appropriate nouns and verbs to convey that right image.

Writers achieve descriptive effects in their stories in a variety of ways with a wide range of tools. Some like to focus on their observations and use adjectives, and lots of them, throughout their writing. Others work hard to find the right nouns (for example, dirge instead of just a song). This requires a superior command of the language. Using a broad vocabulary is not enough.

This type of writing also requires timing—you must be able to determine when to go heavily into the description and when to back away from it. Some like to let the story be told by the well-chosen words of others in direct quotations. The primary rule is simple: When you think description helps a story, make certain what you are writing is distinctive. Description and color should have a purpose. If you can find unique characteristics instead of the ordinary, then the additional color, or atmosphere, you add to a story through detailed descriptive writing usually works. Certainly, the way you write it also makes a difference. Choosing words and putting them together also affects the impact description has on your readers. Organization, or order, of the information has a similar impact.

Jack Hart (1990a), a retired University of Oregon professor and former managing editor and writing coach at *The Oregonian*, feels description and color add spice to writing. He wrote: "Ordinarily, descriptive color or interesting details brighten news writing, helping draw readers into stories by sparking vivid images in their minds. When used skillfully, such details help motivate readers to make the paper part of their daily routine. But color, like everything else in a story, should serve some larger purpose. Well-chosen details may help to create a mood important to the story. They may serve as evidence for a generalization. Maybe they reveal something about the

personality of a key character. Or they introduce an object that will be important to an action line" (p. 3).

Creating Images in the Mind

As Jack Hart, who worked as an editor on four Pulitzer Prize projects and was the solo editor on two of them, noted, detail and color must do something for a feature story when a writer uses them. Ultimately, they should advance the story or contribute to the main theme, he said.

A good feature story is enhanced with strong artwork such as photographs or drawings when the artwork and story come together as a unit on the page. Yet, you often must write as if there is no art with the story; you must write to allow your readers to create images in their minds from reading your article. It does not take much to illustrate this point. Pick up most magazines and you will find at least one article rich in description and detail that give a certain color or atmosphere to the story.

For example, magazine writer Kate Brothers (2008) portrayed a scene in Kabul, Afghanistan, as part of her story about the work of non-governmental organizations to revive and reconstruct the historic neighborhoods of parts of Afghanistan for an issue of the internationally oriented *CNN Traveller*. Here is how they opened the story with a moment in time and place in an old section of Kabul:

> *Dust swirls down the lane, making a gaggle of goats sneeze extravagantly. Old men sit in the sun in the bazaar waiting for the next call to prayer and hordes or labourers manoeuver wheelbarrows of tools back and forth. A frisson of expectation hangs in the air. This is Murad Khane, the last remaining section of 19th-century Kabul, and it is now a modern experiment in recreating traditional Afghanistan.*
>
> *Back in the late 1970s, Afghanistan's communist government decided to demolish the area, in line with a Soviet-inspired master plan for the city. All investment ended, the population of several thousand moved out and the place fell into ruin … .*
>
> (Brothers, 2008, p. 80)

Writing with a feel for place sets a scene effectively and can be achieved by using honed observation and all your senses, by interviewing, and by information-collating skills. This means employing one's senses as reporting tools, in other words, and it does not come automatically for many feature writers. Make a conscious effort to do it. Such reporting and writing takes considerable experience to write well to convey color and atmosphere in a story, any story. You have to get out and look around. Pay attention to detail. People have to be persuaded to talk, to open up. One goal is to provide information to readers through description and color. In this way, color and description do something significant for the article. They are not padding or simply there to impress editors.

A contribution of value to the entire piece occurs in the lead to Brothers' article because it sets a scene. It might seem to be stating the obvious about Kabul, which has been in the news for many years, but to get the detail and description needed, writers

must get out of the office and tell readers. This sort of description can hardly be gathered by telephone. To do it effectively, leave the office. Leave home. Leave town if possible. Writers need to get to the location of people and events to get the right stimulation for this level of detail and description. Sometimes, unfortunately, beginning writers don't understand that this is necessary for a successful story.

Writers must also, as Rivers argued, make the effort of reading a rewarding experience. Some elements of satisfaction should result for readers. Success [of your article] pivots almost entirely on whether readers finish a descriptive [article or passage] with the feeling that they have been through a satisfying reading experience. The most evocative descriptives --- those fashioned by writers who have developed and refined a talent for using visual words --- are also viewing experiences (Rivers, 1992, pp. 242–243).

Although they were written more than three decades ago, these two short passages from Tom Wolfe's classic 1966 article in *Esquire* about stock car driver Junior Johnson illustrate that point as they set a scene for the profile:

> *Ten o'clock Sunday morning in the hills of North Carolina. Cars, miles of cars, in every direction, millions of cars, pastel cars, aqua green, aqua blue, aqua beige, aqua buff, aqua dawn, aqua dusk, aqua Malacca, Malacca lacquer, Cloud lavender, Assassin pink, Rake-a-Cheek raspberry, Nude Strand coral, Honest Thrill orange, and Baby Fawn Lust cream-colored cars are all going to the stock car races, and that old mothering North Carolina sun keeps exploding off the windshields.*
>
> *Seventeen thousand people, me included, all of us driving out Route 421, out to the stock car races at the North Wilkesboro Speedway, 17,000 going out to a five-eighths-mile stock car track with a Coca-Cola sign out front. This is not to say there is no preaching and shouting in the South this morning. There is preaching and shouting. Any of us can turn on the old automobile transistor radio and get all we want.*
>
> (Wolfe, 1966, pp. 105–106)

Not much further into the same story, a different but equally powerful image-provoking passage by Wolfe appears:

> *And suddenly my car is stopped still on Sunday morning in the middle of the biggest traffic jam in the history of the world. It goes for ten miles in every direction from the North Wilkesboro Speedway. And right there it dawns on me that as far as this situation is concerned, anyway, all the conventional notions about the South are confined to—the Sunday radio. The South has preaching and shouting, the South has grits, the South has country songs, old mimosa traditions, clay dust, Old Bigots, New Liberals—and all of it, all of that old mental cholesterol, is confined to the Sunday radio. What I was in the middle of—well, it wasn't anything one hears about in panels about the South today. Miles and miles of eyebusting pastel cars on the expressway, which roar right up into the hills, going to the stock car races. Fifteen years of stock car racing, and baseball – and the state of North Carolina alone used to have forty-four professional baseball teams—baseball is all over within the South. We are all in the middle of a wild*

> *new thing, the Southern car world, and heading down the road on my way to see a breed such as sports never saw before, Southern stock car drivers, all lined up in these two-ton mothers that go over 175 m.p.h.*
>
> (Wolfe, 1966, p. 106)

Even if you know very little about cars and racing, Wolfe's methodical descriptive writing makes it seem as if you are there. It grabs readers and they want to know what is next. After reading this, ask yourself why this story creates such vivid images in your mind. Is it the unusual colors (adjectives) he describes? Is it the emphasis on an action event (driving to the races) you can experience? Is it the writer's enthusiasm and excitement (emotions) for the subject? Or it could be the reconstruction of dialogue (direct quotes). In fact, it is probably a little of each of these factors that contributes to Wolfe's success. Wolfe often utilizes what he called the four techniques of realism in his writing. In a writing style that has been labeled "new journalism" by the writers and scholars studying it, these new journalists of the 1960s and 1970s often employed four basic strategies that Wolfe described:

1 *Scene-by-scene construction of events* – Scene-by-scene construction is the most basic of organizational schemes and is different from narrative writing. It is a form of storytelling illustrated by Wolfe's (1966, p. 106) description of the drive on a Sunday morning to the stock car races.
2 *Full record of dialogue in the scenes* – Magazine and online news site writers, with the luxury of more space, can take advantage of this by using longer passages of exact dialogue from sources or between sources and the writer. In this way, however, sources nearly become characters as this type of writing edges toward the fiction form called a short story.
3 *Third-person point of view* – Although this is the norm in most feature writing, this type of writing exhibited by Wolfe shows less involvement by the writer than a first-person point of view would offer.
4 *Detailing of descriptive incidentals* – Wolfe calls this sort of writing technique a "social autopsy," the attention the writer pays to minute details of the source's life in characterizing the person (Gilder, 1981).

Whenever you try to create images in your reader's mind, remember you cannot drift from reality. In writing nonfiction, there must still be some information value to the article. You should always ask yourself, "What is the news hook or news peg of the story?" Its focus and current value must be clear to you and to your readers.

Descriptive Writing and Interviewing

There will be times when you are assigned to conduct an interview as a basis for a story such as a profile and find that the story needs enrichment through description. This makes your challenge as a writer even tougher because you must not only concentrate on the interview by listening to your source's answers, but you must also be concerned with noting details before, during, and after. These sorts of additions to a feature cannot come from interviews by telephone or texting. They must be done in person. For example, you should pay attention to the person's body language, or his

or her physical responses to your questions, in addition to what is said. Watch facial expressions, for shifts in seating position, gestures, and other mannerisms. Listen carefully for intonations and other speaking characteristics.

You can employ techniques of detailed and descriptive writing to set a single impression of an interview for your reader. As you have probably noted, this is not necessarily objective. For magazine writers, this is often possible. Many newspapers will permit such writing freedom in certain types of features such as columns, analyses, and interpretive articles, and long-form features. Remember, however, you must remain objective for most features by being fair and careful about what you observe. When done well, this becomes an asset for the writer and for the storytelling.

Regardless of the sort of story you are writing, use of description must be built on careful word selection. Remember that you will be serving as the eyes, ears, and other sense organs for your readers. During your interview, take advantage of interruptions to notice things about the room. What is on the desk? How is the room decorated? What objects are on the walls? How is the person you are interviewing dressed? How is his or her hair cut? What sort of food is being served? What color are the person's eyes? Look for characteristics no matter how minute they seem. Look for subtle things such as brand names and the positioning of furniture. What do they tell you about your source?

Also remember that you are not the brains of your readers. Leave the conclusions about what you have observed to your readers. You are better off not making judgments about what you describe. Personal conclusions and interpretations are most often not used in newspaper features and many times not desired in magazine article writing unless you are a qualified expert on a subject and can make such comments with authority.

Anna Quindlen, novelist and winner of the 1992 Pulitzer Prize for commentary as a columnist and feature writer for *The New York Times*, said when she covers an event for an atmosphere piece, she writes down everything she sees. "I take down quotes, names on signs, and all those things. Just in case it might fit in. And I don't want to trust my memory. Sometimes you remember something red and it's really pink or blue" (Quindlen, 1984, n.p.).

Using the Right Supporting Cast

As a writer, words are your supporting cast. Like a play or a film, you need the right ones for the right script. You have two basic strategies for writing when it comes to word selection and usage: writing with general, ambiguous words and writing with specific, clear words. Consider, for a moment, the value of the right nouns and verbs and their grammatical assistants, adjectives, and adverbs.

What exactly are their roles in your story?

Adjectives and adverbs convey distinct impressions. Adjectives express the qualities of the nouns they modify. Adjectives can be descriptive, and proper (similar to proper nouns), and they can be restrictive. These words tell us more about the noun. Adverbs do much the same thing, except they can also modify adjectives in addition to expressing time, place, manner, degree, or cause. Adverbs limit, or further define, the verbs with which they are used. In descriptive or color writing, this is perhaps the most important category of words feature writers can use. "Strong modifiers also evoke strong images," Jack Hart, former writing coach for *The Oregonian*, reminded

us. "Writers who consistently pick winners look for specific adjectives and adverbs" (Hart, 1990d, p. 1).

Writers most often use verbs to connote movement, action, or an assertion. Verbs are necessary in sentences, performing the expression of action, existence, and occurrence. A writer who does not vary verb usage, or sticks to the same dull verbs all the time, will take much of the life out of the writing. "Our audience naturally focuses on action," Hart noted. "Journalists sell information about action. And when they lose sight of that simple truth, they lose readers" (Hart, 1990c, p. 1).

Nouns, of course, describe something substantive such as things, concepts, people, places, and objects. There are common nouns, such as generic words (automobile), but writers also use more specific proper nouns (such as Ford or Mustang). Abstract nouns describe ideas and qualities (love or loving), and concrete nouns are more definitive objects (bird or sidewalk). Collective nouns describe groups (faculty) whereas mass nouns describe things not usually counted (sand). Look at these examples of general and ambiguous usages:

- The small television was powered by batteries.
- The neighborhood doesn't have any pets like that cat.

Look at these examples of specific and more meaningful usages:

- Four AAA-sized nickel-cadmium batteries powered the two-inch black and white Panasonic television.
- The secluded cul de sac doesn't have any other mixed-breed rescue cats like Mimi.

The examples are simple enough. The goal is to emphasize the prevailing characteristics of the subject about which you are writing, and, at the same time, convey excitement or other emotions.

Writing Descriptive Leads

Descriptive features that convey the color of an event have the important duty of helping to balance the content of a publication. Of the three major types of magazine leads—descriptive, expository, and narrative—only the descriptive lead draws the reader into the article by painting pictures at the outset. The idea of giving features special descriptive content and attention to detail and color is, of course, not a new one. Neither is giving the lead of a story a particularly heavy dose of description as a device to interest readers in the subject a new device of writers.

In fact, University of Wisconsin Professor Willard Bleyer, in his early textbook about journalistic writing that was published more than a century ago, said description in the lead of a story is crucial to the success of features.

"A vivid bit of description is sometimes used to advantage at the beginning. If, instead of merely describing and explaining a mechanical process, the writer portrays men actually performing the work involved in the process, he adds greatly to the interest of the article," Bleyer wrote. "The effectiveness of an explanation of a new surgical operation can be increased to a marked degree by picturing a surgeon as he performs the operation" (Bleyer, 1913, p. 229).

The late Myrick Land (1993), who was a magazine editor and writer as well as a novelist, taught at the University of Nevada, Reno, before his retirement. Land said there are numerous options for leads that can employ description and detail. Land listed the anecdote, the narrative series of examples, the first person, the straightforward statement, the surprising statement, the surprising quote, the question, the "you" or direct address, the quotation, the single example, the opinion statement, and the general descriptive leads. Regardless of the type, he said, the lead should "emerge naturally from the research on your article. An effective lead can be written only if you have shown imagination in selecting a subject, have focused sharply on one aspect of that topic, have been thorough in gathering background information, and have conducted enough well-planned interviews" (p. 85).

Former *New York Times* staff writer Rick Bragg used detail in an effective manner in his feature stories about the American South. The 1996 Pulitzer Prize winner in feature writing, captured the essence of an event or an individual through his insightful observations and his ability to turn those observations into words. The author of nine books, he learned storytelling, he says, by listening to stories at home as a child. For one feature for *The Times*, he attended the funeral of former Alabama Gov. George Wallace and conveyed the mood and atmosphere in his lead:

> *The coffin, draped in the blood-red "X" on pure white that is Alabama's state flag, seemed almost too heavy to carry. Eight young, strong-looking Alabama state troopers bore the coffin foot by foot down the massive marble steps of the state Capitol, some of them having to place two hands on the rails of the coffin to steady it between them.*
>
> *It was not the weight of it – George Wallace was just a small man, withered even more by paralysis and age – but the distance. They carried him some 100 steps. From the rotunda where thousands had viewed his body, down the steep walkway from the Capitol he had once used as a war room to preserve segregation, and off into history. It was eerily quiet, just footsteps on stone.*
>
> *Just minutes before the troopers carried him off to his funeral and burial in Montgomery, Janel Bell, a 32-year-old black woman, gazed down at the man who had once been shorthand for racism in America, and then, after begging for forgiveness, had won the black vote in his final campaign for governor.*
>
> *"A servant of the people," Bell said.*
>
> (Bragg, 1998, p. A20)

Descriptive Writing Guidelines

Journalist Daniel Williamson (1975) suggested six guidelines for using description in feature writing:

1 *Remember that you are, in effect, the eyes, ears, and nose of your readers*— Your job is to gather an assortment of material that the readers can analyze and assimilate into an image. In this role, always be aware of any characteristic, however subtle, that would aid readers in coming up with an accurate image.

2 *Don't allow your presence as a reporter to influence the subject*—Try to blend with the woodwork so that you can observe the subject in a natural state. When it's necessary to conduct an interview, try to put the subject at ease so that he will act more naturally.
3 *Gather an abundance of notes—much more than you can use*—Then, before writing, sift through your notes to determine which observations most effectively capture the whole subject.
4 *In writing, spread description throughout the story*— Large "clumps" of description may get in the way of reader flow.
5 *A fine line exists between the presence of too much description and the absence of enough description*—That fine line is the feature writer's target. If the story is tedious with descriptive detail, chop less important details. If the story doesn't succeed in allowing you to "see" the subject, add more description.
6 *Although a writer should, indeed, act as the ears, eyes, and nose for his readers, he should never try to assume the role of their brain by inserting his personal conclusions and interpretations*—Often, such a conclusion is only a lazy shortcut for good descriptive writing.

Readers thrive on details, especially when the writer is focusing on something unfamiliar to most readers. An article that starts with richness in detail and imagery wins readers from the first sentence to the last. If you do not see this, just look at the titles and summaries on the current fiction bestseller list. Or read a short story by a well-known writer. Good nonfiction writers do this as well.

Adding Descriptive Color to Features

Color is another word for description and impressions in feature writing. Color in stories is an important feature forms. These stories are often used to provide readers with the most impressionistic aspects of a news event or other activity. Newspapers and online news sites sometimes use color stories as sidebars to help explain a major news story by providing atmosphere or mood—happy or sad, warm, or cold, exciting, or dull— for those who could not be there. At other times, these stories are written to stand alone.

Frequently, color stories in newspapers and online news sites are used with the major news of the day—tragedies such as airline crashes or car accidents or joyful moments such as a papal visit, an annual festival, or the opening of a new public facility. Color stories are used to relate the mood of crowds at events such as football games, festivals, parties, street and block parties, and other celebrations, parades, concerts, funerals, and memorial services. For example, at a major college football game between rivals or the opening day of baseball season in a major city, a color story approach might highlight the activities and reactions of a group of fans that followed the home team on the road several hundred miles to see the big game. Or those at a corner bar near the stadium who waited through a long winter for the new season to begin. It might focus on the team on the sidelines or in the dugout during the game. It might focus on celebrities in the VIP boxes, field level, or elsewhere. It might reflect the party-like atmosphere at the tailgate or tent parties of alumni and social groups, season-ticket holders, and other fans in the parking lot before the

game. It can focus on the reaction of a single person who might be pivotal to the major story of that day.

Ron Thibodeaux, a writer and editor for the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, has been called the chronicler of Cajun Country. He has provided his newspaper's readers with glimpses into small-town life in Louisiana's bayous. One feature story about a supper club in the tiny rural Louisiana town of Chataignier is a strong example. Here's how used descriptive details and color in combination with the words of the people involved to tell the story of a supper club's role in the town's social life:

CHATAIGNIER — There's never been a bowling alley in this town of 383 people. There used to be a movie theater, with metal folding chairs, but it shut down a long time ago. And one by one, the four bars closed their doors.

So what's a group of buddies to do on boys' night out? In this corner of the rural Cajun prairie, they have supper. Every Thursday night, Fuzzy, Ironhead, Pinky, T-Don and the other members in good standing with the Chataignier Supper Club gather in the old shed in Darren D'Aubin's yard and kick back.

"There's no more place for us to socialize, there's no more little bars or nothing left around here, so once a week we get together and cook," said Kevin "Ironhead" Richard, 39.

"What's better than good food and good company, you know?" added Pat Duplechain, 54. "There's 16 of us. You eat 15 weeks for free, and the 16th week you furnish a meal for the other 15 people."

Gathering for a meal with friends as a social event is a very Evangeline Parish thing to do, from Ville Platte to the smallest farming communities. Men do it, women do it—even teen-agers, although not as frequently.

A typical menu includes a main course such as deer, duck, crawfish or barbecues, plus salad and dessert. There are few secret recipes in the supper clubs, because most members are none too shy about what makes their recipes the best around.

And usually, it's just called supper. The Chataignier Supper Club trots out its formal name only on those weekends when it enters cooking contests at area festivals for fun and bragging rights.

The guys start showing up after work, each carrying his own beverages in a small ice chest. While one does the cooking, the others sit around on the porch or in the clubhouse where their festival cooking trophies are displayed. They catch up on one anothers' news and swap jokes and stories while knocking back a cold beer or two until the meal is ready. The only ground rules: No religion and no politics.

On one recent Thursday night as D'Aubin kept a pot of crawfish etouffee simmering on the gas stove, the talk ranged from snakes and skunks to the Persian Gulf War to the traffic problems on U.S. 190 to Eunice High School football. The conversation reflects working men's sensibilities and longtime friends' camaraderie. Roy Fontenot has been with the phone company for 29 years. Don Thibodeaux is a welder. Duplechain is a heating and air conditioning maintenance worker. Fuzzy Quinilty is a farmer and crop duster, as well as an

accomplished accordion player. Many of these men, in their late 40s or 50s have lived here all their lives and known one another since their school days.

D'Aubin, a real estate appraiser, is one of the newcomers. A Harahan native, he earned entry when he married Quinilty's daughter.

*The group's clubhouse is known to old-timers around Chataignier (*pronounced "shuh–TAN–yuh") as the former cotton gin office from the 1940s and '50s. The men started having supper at Thibodeaux's home in the mid-1980s— until he got married. They bounced from place to place until the D'Aubins bought 13 acres "in the country" abut five years ago. The outbuilding on the property proved to be the perfect meeting place for the weekly supper. Well, almost perfect.*

"It was an old falling-down shed," Duplechain said. "It had trees practically growing through it. Everybody worked together to clean it up. Then somebody brought in an old stove, somebody had an air conditioner, others brought furniture. We got it fixed up pretty nice."

Then there was the matter of the beehive in the ceiling.

"We treated it. We tried smoking them out," Duplechain said. "I don't know what finally ran them off. Fontenot remembered. "It was the smell of those burning onions!" he said.

(Thibodeaux, 2001) (Permission granted by The Times-Picayune Publishing Corporation. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.)

Rarely does a color story focus on the results of the game or even the principal action of the game. That is likely the purpose of another story by the same reporter or, as preferred by most editors, by a second or even a third reporter. In short, the idea behind this sort of writing is to permit the reader who did not attend to share the event with the writer and others who were there. Color stories take advantage of certain types of sources of information. Color stories almost always have people, your perceptions as an observer, your observations, and a common thread.

These are often reaction stories, but the reaction is often that of the writer. Professor Louis Alexander (1975) said these types of stories are usually written with a point of view or a focus that directs the article. What are you trying to say about the subject? What storyline, or other literary device, are you using? How can you arrange the information to give the event some of the atmosphere it needs? Alexander added that when you successfully answer these questions, you have done your job well.

"Overall, because you have all the colors in it [the article] you give the reader a much stronger, more meaningful, more colorful picture—the blacks and the whites, the grays, the blues and peppermint stripes and everything else," Alexander wrote. "You accomplish this by planning your story to make one major point or leave one message and by selecting a story line on which to hang or arrange your materials" (pp. 58–59).

Feature stories, such as the one by Thibodeaux, underline the importance of description in setting scenes and elaborating details for readers. The goal is to allow readers to picture the Louisiana supper club gathering to enjoy a meal. The selection of words and scenes must be continuously useful to the reader, or interesting, or both, however.

"One sentence should grow out of another; one paragraph should grow out of another. The middle and end should be as interesting as the beginning," observed the late professor William Rivers (1992). "Although a color story has no standard structure, the 'hard news' should usually be somewhere near the beginning" (p. 249).

In writing to use color as a tool in your article, several guidelines on detailed content were offered by retired University of Florida professor Benton Rain Patterson (1986):

- Don't summarize scenes, dialogue, or action. Recreate them.
- Be specific and avoid vagueness.
- Show, don't tell. Let the reader see something.
- Identify the characters and sources completely when they are introduced.
- Describe the characters and sources in your article.
- Include important detail to let reader see, but do not show the reader irrelevant objects or insignificant details. These mislead and provide clutter.

Patterson, a former newspaper and magazine editor and writer during his professional career, said "there are elements that may be added to a story to make it more interesting, more significant, more memorable: plot (or story line), suspense, conflict, change (whereby one or more characters undergoes a change in understanding, attitude, condition, etc.), and climax. When they are a part of reality, a feature writer should put them into a piece. If they are not a part of the reality, there is no way they can be included. To do so would turn fact into fiction" (p. 20).

You can often take what Patterson said about detailed content and apply it to a major event to enliven it for readers. New York writer Anna Quindlen (1984) has a tested and proven successful strategy she uses in writing features. The approach works to portray events, such as the Feast of St. Anthony on Sullivan Street in Manhattan, which she once covered as a feature writer. When she wrote features for *The New York Times'* "About New York" column, she loved to cover such a "quintessential New York event."

"In something like this, where I'm basically going to take the reader and put him on this street, on this day, on this beat, my problem more than anything else is figuring out how to organize and then pick and choose the telling details that are really going to make him feel like he was here with me," she explained (Quindlen, 1984, n.p.).

She likened covering such an event to painting a picture —she works as an artist painting images with words.

"If you try to hold up a mirror to an event, if you paint it in broad strokes, you're going to miss on colors, you're going to miss on sights, you're going to miss on all kinds of things. I think if you're going to hold up a mirror and do the painting, the best thing to do is pointillism — a whole bunch of little points. When the reader steps back and looks at it, when they're done, they're not going to see the little points, they're going to see a whole big picture" she explained (Quindlen, 1984, n.p.).

Color writing is a very personal style of writing, Quindlen explained. Each person will gain a different perspective on the same event and will probably write a different story. "Everybody faced with the same event will give you a different viewpoint, a different answer, a different set of people," she noted. (Quindlen, 1984, n.p.). And, she added, you must have confidence in yourself as a writer to write about your own

perceptions and reactions to a given situation. "It's the self-confidence that comes from self-confidence in your personality and not so much your skills. I'm just different. I have different perceptions" (Quindlen, 1984, n.p.).

Creating Tone and Moods

Good color writing will set a tone for the story and send signals to the reader about the nature of the story being told. You can manipulate moods and even emotions through your choice of words, organization, and flow of the information you offer and, of course, the subject about which you are writing. Louis Alexander (1975) said that if you can do well writing color, that is, creating a mood for the reader, the rewards are high for both the reader and writer. "When you get your story across, when you convey the color and drama that make other people feel it, you the feature writer gain genuine satisfaction," Alexander explained (p. 59).

Finding Details for Description and Color

People and their appearance
Detailed personal experiences of others
Direct quotations from key people in the story
Dialogue between key people
Your own observations of scenes
Your senses as part of those observations
Actions that key people in the story take
Environments of the story's settings
Your own perceptions of what you experienced
Your own attitudes and emotions in reaction to what you experienced
Your personal experiences from any level of participation

As you move into specific types of feature stories in the next chapters in the next section, you should get ideas for application of the techniques of descriptive and color writing in each one. For example, you see wide possibilities for descriptive writing on seasonal topics and on travel subjects. Some of these types of stories are easy to write and others do not lend themselves to descriptive writing approaches very readily. Writing with heavy emphasis on detail is a valuable tool for feature writers.

Coming to Your Senses

New Mexico writer and online writing coach Roy Sorrels, a correspondent for *Writer's Digest* magazine, is both a magazine feature writer and a novelist and short story writer. He tells interested persons that he specializes as a writing coach for fiction and creative non-fiction, and he offered an exercise for "sensuous writing" — that is, writing with your senses.

"To make your own writing more sensuous, take a series of blind walks. Ask an understanding friend—another writer maybe—to help. Close your eyes and let your

companion guide you gently through a few environments," he suggested. "Down a city street, perhaps, past the busy schoolyard, into the park. At first, you will be a bit nervous with your vision cut off, but relax and you'll become more and more aware of all the rich input from your other four senses. Relax into the sounds; notice the surface under your feet—gritty sidewalks, cobblestones, dirt in the park, lush or scraggly grass. Smell the world—can you tell when you pass by the bakery or the fishmonger? With your friend's guidance, touch things in the park—grass, tree trunks, or a worn park bench. Of course, you can do this on your own, just closing your eyes for a few minutes sitting at a sidewalk cafe, or on a bus, or lounging under a tree" (Sorrels, 1986, p. 40).

Writer Mimi Murphy used her senses to open her cover article about Rome for *National Geographic Traveler*. In Murphy's case, it was her observational skills. The Rome resident simply looked around and noted details of what people were doing. Her insider's view of Rome, seeing it as Romans do, opened with this descriptive approach:

> *For Romans,* la bella figura*—looking good— is primal. If all the world is a stage, Romans are the players who strut their stuff with uncommon elegance, breezy sophistication, and impeccable style. After all, there is an art to driving a Vespa in stiletto heels. "'Never judge a book by its cover' sounds like an oversimplification in Italian," says Italian journalist Beppe Severgnini in his 2006 bestseller* La Bella Figura. *"We judge books by their covers, politicians by their smiles, professionals by their offices, secretaries by their posture, table lamps by their design, cars by their styling, and people by their title … ."*
>
> (Murphy, 2008, p. 79)

Most of the article's sections focus on five residents' views of Rome's sights to see, food to eat, shops, places to stay, and, of course, its nightlife. The sections are summarized with small details and direct quotations from her five local residents that can assist visitors to decide what to do on their next visit. With photographer Bob Krist's images, the package gives readers excellent ideas for a trip to Rome, and, of course, how to experience it as a resident. Murphy offered readers a lasting perspective of her fellow Romans before she launched into the various specific sections of the article:

> *Yes, Romans get fed up with the chaotic traffic, the sclerotic public-transportation system, the strikes— but never with their Eternal City. They love sitting on the piazzas with a cappuccino, or sipping an* aperitivo *with a sunset view of Rome's cupolas and towers. To really do as the Romans do, just follow the expertise of our five locals, all fully versed in the art of Roman living.*
>
> (Murphy, 2008, p. 79)

Using senses in a similar manner to create an atmosphere of a busy art trading center, United Press International writer Frederick M. Winship concluded his feature about a wholesale African art market in a storage facility in the middle of Manhattan in New York City:

> *Some of these more valuable objects may be looted art—stolen from museums and universities or illegally excavated from burial sites, but no one at Chelsea Mini-Storage is asking about provenance, the source or origin of a work of art. A*

visit to the African art center toward the rear of the building is a heady sensual experience. The scent of burning stick incense and the smell of exotic foods prepared and sold to traders by female cooks in a backroom kitchen pervade the area, as does the sound of many tribal dialects mixed with French patois and the murmur of Muslim dealers at prayer in a carpeted space reserved for worship.

The stalls, their steel doors pushed out of sight, are bulging with hundreds of wood sculptured gods, goddesses, sacred animals and demons, ritual pouches and food containers, a grand array of human and animal masks, drums and stringed instruments, and a wide variety of textiles. Traders say some of the best things come from poor, remote villages where barter in needed goods is preferred to cash.

"Good trading is built on trust and friendship," a Gambian trader told UPI.

"This is more important to many Africans than money."

(Winship, 2002, n.p.)

Enhancing Writing with Figurative Language

Many writers who leave lasting images in the minds of their readers know how to use figurative language in an effective manner. Simply put, figurative language is a device that helps readers understand your meaning. Commonly, journalists use concrete words and their modifiers for precision in meaning. Experienced writers also know when to use the two of these forms known as metaphors and similes. Writers often also use allusions and personifications. These are not, of course, the exclusive turfs of fiction writers such as classic poets or short story writers.

Metaphors and similes create impressions in readers by comparing things that are usually not associated. "Combine two previously isolated categories and something mysterious happens. Synapses sizzle. New connections appear. Synergy fashions a new form greater than the sum of the parts," explained Jack Hart, the former *Oregonian* writing coach and managing editor (1989, p. 1). "Metaphors describe something in terms of something else. They imply comparisons. Similes are more direct comparisons, commonly identified by the use of like or as. The allusion is simply an indirect reference. This occurs most often by using some sort of reference commonly known by writer and readers. Personifications give objects human characteristics."

Tools such as metaphors enhance written communication, but this touch by the writer makes the story more interesting and more appealing to the average reader. As Hart (1990b) explained, you are not only serving readers when you use figurative language, you are serving yourself. For most writers, such writing is a welcome diversion from the routine. And this might help you remain interested in the art and craft of writing.

Madeleine Blais, a journalism professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, won the Pulitzer Prize for feature writing in 1980 while working as a staff writer for Tropic Magazine, the defunct Sunday supplement of the *Miami Herald*. She strongly believes in the value of detail, description, and color in feature material.

"Detail and color in a piece of journalism should work ideally in the same way they function in poetry or in fiction. They should function metaphorically, or they should help create a mood. They should contribute to a sense of momentum, not clutter," she

explained. "In the kind of journalism which is only interested in record-keeping, details and color are often used to telegraph the fact that the reporter was an actual witness. In this approach, quotations are also used to prove the presence of the reporter. Thus, quotations are often included that contain little or no information and contribute not a whit to the overall design. Such pieces peter out rather than build and that is why cutting from the bottom makes sense."

Literary features offer a connection between some features that are fun to read and those that tell us what is happening in a dry manner, Blais said. But it requires work from writers still learning the craft.

"Journalism that attempts to be literary narrows the gap between writing that only entertains and writing that only informs. How can you train yourself to know what details to include? First, keep up with your reading of literature. Second, when you are out on a story, use all your senses, not just your ears. I remember once interviewing a woman who wanted more than anything else to rid herself of a bad situation. She kept saying as much, over and over, as she stood in her kitchen, but nothing she said spoke to her pain as insistently and clearly as the way in which she kept sponging and sponging an already immaculate kitchen counter," Blais continued.

"I once wrote a story about a woman who is schizophrenic. It is one thing to say that she lives in a disordered world, another to say: 'Two years after Trish's mother died, she wrote her a letter, asking for cigarettes.' Once I wrote a short piece entitled 'Monica's Barrel' about a woman who had immigrated from Jamaica and who periodically sent home barrels, big cardboard cylinders with tops made of tin, to the people she had left behind. At first, I was going to write that if she had stayed home, she would be poor. Upon prodding from my editor, I wrote: 'In Jamaica, Monica's brightest prospect would be a job at the bra and underwear factory making $50 a week in an economy where $5 buys a pound of rice'," she said.

"Another time I wanted to convey the sense of a beach resort as the epitome of safe haven: 'We spend all winter telling the children never to say hello to strangers, yet here the stranger is likely to be a woman with gray hair wearing a belt with whales who happens to be circulating a petition to save St. Joseph's parsonage from being sold to developers.' When in doubt, turn to Strunk & White's *The Elements of Style* before embarking on an important piece: read it, re-read it, memorize and then proceed" (Personal communication to author, October 1, 1988).

Chapter 8

Storytelling, Writing, and Editing

Effective storytelling and strong writing take a lot of skill and much work. It takes strong communication skills and motivation to use them. You must understand the art within the storytelling. It takes creative energy and effort. The best feature writing has its roots in this type of writing, especially the art of storytelling. Good writing also has a certain foundation on which it is built and a certain polish or finish on which it is sold to the buyer.

People like to hear and read interesting stories. We, as feature writers, like to tell stories. Originally, it was done orally. It is a rich cultural and social tradition throughout the world. For fiction writers, storytelling is everything. To be successful, they must master plot, character development, selection of place or setting, present a message, demonstrate conflict, resolve the conflict, and do it all with the ability or mastery of craft. We, as professional feature writers, do much the same as fiction writers with our non-fiction. While we do not invent our plots or characters or settings, we have the ability to identify the right mix of these elements to tell a strong feature story anchored in the realities of life. The best features do this.

The late E. B. White wrote in *The Elements of Style* that his Cornell University professor, William Strunk, once said, "The best writers sometimes disregard the rules of rhetoric. When they do so, however, the reader will usually find in the sentence some compensating merit, attained at the cost of the violation. Unless he is certain of doing as well, he will probably do best to follow the rules" (Strunk & White, 1979, p. xvi).

Storytelling and Borrowing from Fiction

Some of the best nonfiction writers in the United States write in a fiction style and use the tools of short story writers and novelists. Use of dialogue is but one frequently found example. Numerous successful and popular U.S. novelists began as nonfiction writers, many as journalists, for example. These include Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Ernest Hemingway, Tom Wolfe, and Gay Talese. Numerous modern journalists have crossed into fiction and crossed back (Kessler, 2004a, September). There is as much in common between the two approaches as there is not. Four elements in particular – levels of abstraction, storytelling, use of tension, and development of characters—work effectively in many forms of feature writing:

1 *Abstraction* – Summaries, separate from the specific, seem to be the opposite of what most feature writers use in their writing. Feature writers seldom delve into the theoretical world, right? Without getting overly philosophical, they do.

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Although an abstract is the essence of something, such as a series of events or a single event, writers often write in the abstract. You do. There are times when you are general, others when you are specific. Former University of Oregon professor and *The Oregonian* managing editor Jack Hart made this proper observation: "The best literary writers recognize the importance of varying abstraction levels, depending on the purposes they have in mind. But lots of journalists pay little attention to the degree of abstraction in their writing. Out of habit, they stay at the same middling abstraction levels all the time. That cruise-control approach robs their writing of both meaning and impact" (Hart, 1991e, p. 1). Hart likes to use a ladder metaphor in referring to levels of abstraction in writing. Think of the bottom of the ladder as the most concrete, or single item, and the top of the ladder as the most general, or everything. And in between, you find varying degrees gradually going from the specific to general as you refer to the item in your article.

2 *Storytelling*–Humans have always been storytellers, and when typesetting came along, the stories began to be preserved. Journalism, in its most primitive form, began to evolve. Feature writers are storytellers. There are both long and short stories to tell. We tend to tell the short ones. However, think of telling stories as something more than just anything you might write. Stories in the strictest form involve more than what most news and feature writers offer. Some experts say that journalists simply tell the end of a good story. Storytelling involves a dynamic beginning, an unusual setting, and a contrast between content and style. Because storytelling involves an entire plot, a good feature writer using story-telling techniques includes the beginning, middle, and then the ending. And the story is often told in this manner, also. Storytelling, in the most traditional manner, is done first-hand. It uses common literary devices such as shifting points of view, irony, dialogue, and surprise endings. Today, it may seem to be a lost art. It was common earlier in this century and remains popular with some magazine and nonfiction book writers (DeSilva, 1990; Hart, 1991d; Wood, 1997).

3 *Tension* – Another tool used by successful feature writers who borrow from fiction writers is tension, the stretching and straining of human emotions to their limits. Pulitzer Prize-winning feature writer Madeleine Blais (1984) said she likes to build her feature articles around tension involving the central sources, or the characters, in her articles. Without it, she says, her articles would not be worth writing. "Tension offers an element of surprise. It allows the reader to imagine many possible endings to the course of the piece. If there isn't some kind of tension, there's no story" (n.p.). One effective method for creating high levels of tension is foreshadowing or hinting at things to come through some description in the article. This works because it hooks readers into finding out what will happen later in the narrative (Hart, 1992).

4 *Characters* – In the preceding paragraph, sources were also described as characters. It is often helpful for feature writers to think of their sources as characters in the overall story they are telling. Naturally, in nonfiction feature writing, the realities of the situation limit what the characters do and do not do. Feature writers develop sources and characters in their articles through the description and the use of direct quotations (The Associated Press, 2022b). There is little else. Although all sources cannot be developed into characters, it helps in

> some articles. Sources are distinct. If feature writers could use some of the descriptive techniques that novelists use in describing their characters, readers would benefit from deeper knowledge of the people in the stories. We should take opportunities, when they come along, to describe people through their words and our observations of their behavior.

We also should describe them in terms of their appearance, their possessions, their values, their beliefs, and even how they move, express themselves with their hands, and how they talk (Hart, 1991a, 1991b). It starts with storytelling skills, some experienced feature writers believe. Joan Ryan, columnist and feature writer for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, emphasized the basic storytelling skill to appeal to readers. Award-winning San Francisco journalist and author Joan Ryan said how the story is told matters the most. "When you tell a story to a kid, it doesn't matter what it's about: Galileo or Abraham Lincoln or some kid having a bad day. If it's well told, that kid will sit there slack-jawed listening to you. I think we never outgrow that. I think we always want to be told a good tale. And I don't think it matters what the subject matter is" (Ryan, 1997, p. 1).

New York writer Ken Auletta, the author of the 2022 non-fiction book "Hollywood Ending: Harvey Weinstein and the Culture of Silence," has continued his leading work about the film mogul and convicted sexual predator. Auletta began telling the full Weinstein story with a ground-breaking and iconic 2002 *The New Yorker* profile, "Beauty and the Beast," when Weinstein was at his most influential and powerful in Hollywood (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/12/16/beauty-and-the-beast-2). In that feature, Auletta told readers about Weinstein's volatile temper and unpredictable behavior, but could not, at that time, find sources, especially the victims, to talk openly about his numerous sexual assaults. Eventually, additional news coverage of Weinstein helped spark the #MeToo social media campaign and social movement.

As an experienced writer – Auletta has been a *The New Yorker* magazine contributor since 1977 – he believes that any time a writer begins a project, small or big, he or she should examine the question of how to tell the story: You don't want the story to dominate the facts and to shape it in a way that's misleading, but essentially you must figure out a way to tell a story. One of the things that is critical to storytelling is to convey a sense that you are trying to be an anthropologist. You are going out there and you are trying to capture the essence of what you are reporting on – be it a personality, an organization, or an incident. To do that, you are going there with Colombo-like questions: innocence, don't know the answers. I always keep this aphorism – in mind: "Truth is a liquid, not a solid" (Auletta, 1997, p. 1).

The Best Writing Techniques

Increasingly, feature writers are using the strengths of literary nonfiction. In fact, some experts have noted that most feature-writing Pulitzer Prizes have been won by individuals writing stories cast as literary nonfiction (Hart, 1995). They do this by identifying classic story elements in daily life. You can do it also. The elements are relatively simple to list: characters, use of dialogue, use of conflict and tension, and strong organization using scene construction.

Good writing such as that found in articles winning Pulitzers for feature writing (https://www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-category/211) is truly difficult to achieve, but with the right desire and right tools, you may be able to do it. Good ideas put on paper (or a computer screen) still need good massaging – good polish, that is – to make them presentable to readers. This chapter presents the basics of effective feature writing, style, and organization. It offers time-tested suggestions for editing your own manuscript.

Some news media critics feel that writing has deteriorated. Professor Neil Postman (1985) blamed it on television and a video-oriented society. Cultural historian Jacques Barzun (1992) agreed, especially about the decline of writing skills within the news media: The unhappy truth is that the prose of the press, and of broadcast news as well, has fallen below the level of competence that once obtained [sic] and that can reasonably be expected. It is not uniformly bad, but the faults are frequent and of many kinds – blurred meanings; pretentiousness; and irrelevant fiction-style. (p. 3) Recently, critics have said text messaging, e-mail, and other smartphone writing have contributed further to the decline.

Work goes into good writing. And more work. The late William Zinsser (1980), who has written features about drama and film for the *New York Herald Tribune* and magazines and authored numerous books, considers good writing a disciplined, rigorous effort that comes from practice. Author of the classic *On Writing Well*, he argued it takes rewriting, what he called the essence of writing. It takes the same regular, daily schedule that a craftsman might use in making furniture or artwork. Zinsser explained that writing is a solitary effort of people who do not mind being alone. Yet he also believes writing can be easy and fun. Lawyers, for example, often write with clutter and complexity in their search for the precision necessary in legal documents. Good writers keep it simple while retaining meaning.

Zinsser (1980) called clutter the "disease of American writing" (p. 7). He is right. This is especially true for writers for mass audience publications. Because there is no reason for feature articles to be complex or difficult, keep your writing simple. This means you must translate complicated material, such as medical or other scientific terms, for your readers. "We are a society strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills and meaningless jargon," Zinsser said (p. 7). Writer Jacques Barzun (1992), who mastered both fiction and non-fiction, was deeply concerned about false meaning in news media writing. He pointed to vogue words and malapropism. Vogue words reduce precision in meaning by giving slangy new meanings to words, keeping better-fitting words out of use. Malapropism is the misuse of often similar but incorrect words. These sorts of writing mistakes, he argued, come from laziness and from ignorance of the language.

Great feature stories include seven basic elements, said Michael Bugeja (1996), Iowa State University magazine writing professor and *Writer's Digest* contributing editor. His seven essential elements are topic, theme, title, viewpoint, voice, moment, and endings. "If you heed these seven basic elements of non-fiction writing, you will make your articles better and you will sell more," Bugeja argued (p. 22). There are ways to be successful and avoid such pitfalls in writing. Minneapolis freelance feature writer Steve Perlstein believes in simplicity for success: "Writing style is surely important, but so is keeping your prose simple and straightforward. Great writers never waste words, and their stories are never one word longer than they need to be.

Superfluous words – whether they are to pad the word count or to make the piece sound more important – are invariably cut in the editing process anyway. If you write too many words about the same thing repeatedly, or just more words than you need, your work winds up looking overblown and tedious, or just plain too long. See what I mean?" (Personal communication to author, January 15, 1998).

A good newspaper, magazine, online news, or newsletter writer keeps thoughts easy to understand. This is done several ways. First, it is done through word selection. Use the right words, but do not use too many of the right words. Be concise. Be precise in meaning. Second, use basic subject-verb-object sentence structure. Even if you can find a way to write a sentence with a verb and then the subject, it is likely to be hard to understand and you have wasted your reader's time. If you do that often enough, you lose the reader permanently. A third way to help the reader understand what you are writing is to use correct grammar. Usages do help the communication process. People are accustomed to seeing certain forms of grammar, such as subject–verb agreement and consistent use of tense. Still another way to write in simple English is to keep an eye on sentence length. The longer the sentence, the harder it is to follow. You do not want your reader going through your article and wondering, "What did that mean? Am I crazy? Why can't I figure out what this means?"

Mary Rajkumar, editor in charge of international high-end enterprise reporting and projects for The Associated Press news service based in Miami, feels good writing comes from a commitment to the subject and belief in getting the story told. This begins, the 2016 Pulitzer Prize Gold Medal winner says, from good thinking about the story as well as good newsgathering. "I write rarely these days. The payoff is that when I do write, it is about things that matter deeply to me. So the first rule is taken care of – start with something you believe is really worth writing about. I believe good writing starts with good thinking and good reporting. Often, before I write, I have an idea swirling around in my head for days, even months. I sit with it until I know more or less what I want to say. If I can't say it in three lines, I know I haven't thought about it enough. Initial reporting and digging can help sharpen my thoughts," Rajkumar, a native of Singapore and graduate of Cambridge and Stanford, stated (Personal communication to author, October 28, 2008).

"I try to make the reporting as detailed and vivid as possible and gather far more than I need. I go back if I need to. Structure is important to me – in my experience as an editor, it's the one area of writing that most writers have trouble with. So I think carefully about how I want to structure the piece for the most impact, and so that the middle doesn't 'sag.' I write it, often in several sit-downs. And then I go away and come back with an editor's hat. It's amazing what a different perspective that brings to your own work," Rajkumar explained. "My rule (and what I tell reporters): When you think you're done, cut by at least 25 percent. Be ruthless. You'll be surprised at what it does for your work – I always am. It makes your language much crisper, helps the flow, forces you to focus on what's really important and telling."

Developing Your Personal Style

Writing style is another consideration when you think about what makes good writing. Every journalist has a personal writing style. Writing style is much like one's

personal appearance. Your appearance reflects your own way of dressing, your mannerisms, and your physical uniqueness. Writing does much of the same thing, but it reveals a bit about our minds, our thinking, our logic, and our expression of those processes. Most experienced writers and writing teachers will tell you that to teach writing, you must start with basics, no matter whether it is sixth grade theme writing or freshman composition at a major state university. As Zinsser (1980) said, "You have to strip down your writing before you can build it back up" (p. 19).

Don't confuse this type of writing style with another type of writing style. Every publication has a style or usages manual. We will discuss it further late on in this chapter. This type of writing is concerned with the best ways to express things, being consistent in doing so, and simply communicating effectively. It includes grammar and spelling but considers many more aspects of how we express our ideas and tell the story.

Mastering the Fundamentals

Las Vegas true crime writer Gary C. King believes in the fundamentals when he writes his specialty, features for true crime magazines. King, who has written true crime books and numerous articles about major crimes, emphasized that writing success is found in the basics.

"In writing for the crime magazines, the writer must use correct standard English. Don't use shortcuts, but don't be stiff and too formal, either. Avoid long 'travelogue' descriptions of the locale where the crime took place (a mistake that many first timers make) in the introductory, and get right to the story, usually the discovery of a body," King advised. "Try to tell the story in chronological order and emphasize the detective work that leads to the solution of the case. In other words, milk the investigative process for everything you can. Don't pinpoint the guilty person too early in the story and use active writing constructions wherever possible. There's no reason that non-fiction writing must be dull. Novices should decide which publication(s) they want to write for, read several copies of the publication, and by all means send off for the magazine's writers' guidelines" (Personal communication to author, May 19, 1993).

After mastering cumbersome language, complex sentence structure, and the like, you can begin to build your own style. The late novelist Paul Darcy Boles (1985) called writing style a "way of saying" and a "way of seeing." He said it is somewhat born into the owner, but it is also borrowed. Many writers become the products of other writers they admire. The process of stealing technique is a rather accepted one in the business of writing – we become a mixture of the styles of writers we read and enjoy the most while we are learning to write. You do not have to work too hard to develop a style. It is not such a conscious matter of writing as it is an unconscious matter of writing. It evolves and comes through your writing whether you want it to or not. Everyone has a writing style.

Some general points about writing mechanics have already been made. You have read about the value of grammar. Not enough can be said to beginning feature writers about spelling, syntax, and punctuation. In fact, the late *Hartford Courant* publisher and publisher Bob Eddy (1979), who taught journalism at Syracuse, called spelling the curse of the working journalist. For writers, each of these skills is important. If you cannot handle the basic skills such as spelling, you will eventually lose your job.

Often writing students dismiss spelling or punctuation as unimportant because, they believe, "It is the idea that matters. I'll learn the rules of grammar and spelling later." If a carpenter were to say that about building a house, it would come crashing down. The same goes for your writing. It will cause your plan to fail unless you use the right tools and materials: language, words, spelling, and punctuation. Correct use of words can be helped by regular use of a dictionary, a thesaurus, and other word reference books available at most bookstores. Your shelves should be stocked with at least one dictionary, a thesaurus, and a handful of stylebooks – at least one, but several if you work for a number of publications or use different writing styles. Several good reference books were suggested in the previous chapter. Each of the following points about good writing requires your attention and time. If you learn to manage them, you should find great improvement in your ability to communicate to the world.

Know Your Audience

In communication, there must be an area of common, or shared, experience. In feature writing, the area of shared experience is reduced because a writer must have a shared experience with thousands of individuals. "The chances soar that a message will go awry when you start factoring more receivers into the equation," said Jack Hart (1990b, p. 3), a former journalism professor at the University of Oregon and editor and writing coach for *The Oregonian*. You need to consider the following: Who is going to read your article? Do you know? Have you thought about it? How can you find out? There is a high degree of seriousness in those questions. If you do not know the answers, can you honestly write well for that audience?

Know your audience. For some publications, it is easy to know who reads each new issue. For others, it is difficult to tell without research. A specialized publication, such as an industry magazine or a legal newspaper, has a well-defined and likely narrow audience. However, the general circulation daily or weekly newspaper, online news site, and some consumer magazines must be researched before you know anything certain about the audience. You want to be careful to write at the level of the audience. If you write too far below it, you will turn off your editor and your readers. If you write too far above it, you will lose your editor and readers as well. In fact, if you miss estimating the audience too much, you will not get past first base with your editor and you will never reach any readers.

You must have a sense of timing with readers and audiences, too. The right mood, writing style, and sensitivity make an article work. Make the wrong choices and the article works against you. Thus, you must know when to use humor, when to be serious, when to be gentle, and when to be emotional. Knowing your audience helps you chart the course through these dangerous waters.

Consistency and Unity

Unity is like an anchor for good writing, Zinsser (1980) said. Some might call this concept a matter of consistency in your writing. Whatever you wind up calling it, remember it is a critical element of good writing.

Tense, pronoun point of view, and mood are all indicators of unity in your writing. It is best to maintain a level of consistency in each. Do not mix tenses. Past and

present tenses in the same sentence only confuse your reader. Writers should not mix voice, either. Feature stories that jump around from first to second to third person are equally disconcerting for readers. Stick with one voice. Most feature stories are written in third person, some in second person, and even fewer in first person.

Mixture of mood can cause perhaps the most serious confusion for a reader who does not know whether to laugh, cry, be sad or happy, or otherwise respond to your message. Tone is also important in feature writing. Writers establish the mood or texture of their features with use of language. This is the tone of the article. Diction, or word choice, contributes to this characteristic of your writing. "When we select one word over another of equal denotative value, we likely make the selection based on the connotative meaning of the word. And by using that connotation, we effectively establish a mood or texture – the tone – of the story," wrote Professor David Brill (1992, p. 32). "In fact, tone is one of the most important elements of writing – and perhaps the most frequently overlooked."

William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White (1979), in their classic *The Elements of Style*, offered cautionary hints to help you find a style that works. Consider these items:

1 Place yourself in the background.
2 Write in a way that comes naturally.
3 Work from a suitable design.
4 Write with nouns and verbs.
5 Revise and rewrite.
6 Do not overwrite.
7 Do not overstate.
8 Avoid the use of qualifiers.
9 Do not affect a breezy manner.
10 Use orthodox spelling.
11 Do not explain too much.
12 Do not construct awkward adverbs.
13 Make sure the reader knows who is speaking.
14 Avoid fancy words.
15 Do not use dialect unless your ear is good.
16 Be clear.
17 Do not inject opinion.
18 Use figures of speech sparingly.
19 Do not take shortcuts at the cost of clarity.
20 Avoid foreign languages.
21 Prefer the standard to the offbeat.

Focus and Depth In Writing

Let us return to focus and depth in the context of writing. Focus comes throughout the article, but it begins with the lead. A well-chosen lead, or introduction, tells the reader what you mean to achieve in the article. It is up to you to guide the reader through the article, much like a road map, with the theme or idea you introduce in the beginning paragraphs.

For a writer, focus is the key. If you can remember this, you will do better as a writer. Your articles will be stronger. The focus must carry through the rest of the article after you have constructed the lead. It carries through the body and dominates the ending also. Think of the focus as the story's angle. To write a feature article only about appliance repairs leaves so much to write that a series of books could be produced. But to write about a shop that repairs household appliances is another matter. And to center the attention on the 85-year-old owner who does all the work himself redirects the story still again. You must be disciplined not to fall to the temptation to drift in your writing.

Examine each paragraph as a unit. Is it necessary? Does it help get to the point? Then examine each sentence within each paragraph. Does each sentence help maintain the point of the paragraph? Then, finally, examine a word within each sentence. Are all words needed? Do they help the purpose of the individual sentence? How do you get the ideas in your mind on paper? Surely, as there are many outlets for your work, there are many approaches to the physical act of writing.

Building Good Writing Habits

There are writers who work in the early morning because they are morning people. They rise and jump at the chance to get their creative juices flowing while they are fresh and energetic. Others, it seems, cannot get going until finishing several cups of coffee, a newspaper, the mail, and other activities. These writers seem most comfortable during the afternoon. And, as you have guessed, some writers thrive in the silence of late-night hours. When all is quiet and the day is almost done, these writers are busy creating and working through much of the night, only to rest afterward.

There are writers who use the voice-to-text tool in their word processor or a digital recorder to write, turning over the mundane duties of typing and preparing a manuscript to software or even an assistant. These "idea" writers will then come back to what has been dictated and revise and edit it. Yet, some writers feel much closer to their work when they can control the keyboard and other tools of the writer's private work environment.

Good writers have smart writing habits and productive work routines (Alexander, 2005). Each writer needs his or her own space for productive writing. It can be a corner in the bedroom, an office in the basement, or any other secluded location. You can find writers who work in absolute silence to enhance their concentration. Some work in a social environment where other people are present, such as an office. The interaction seems to stimulate and inspire rather than interrupt and retard. Others like to have music playing or the television tuned to a program for background noise.

Some writers produce a manuscript in one long and exhausting effort. Others produce it in bits and pieces. Some writers write a manuscript as it is presented, from beginning to end. You will find others who write the middle first, the end, and then the beginning. Some authors research first, then write. Some professionals simultaneously research and write. There also are writers who revise as they write, a sentence at a time. You also can find writers who write many pages and then revise. Some independent writers write in an office at home. Some lease office space or work in a shared workspace to get away from distractions at home. And others who have full-time jobs doing something else, like to write in their regular work environment.

Thomas Clark, who spent four years as editor of *Writer's Digest*, said a critical step in getting started as a writer is setting up. "One of the most important commitments you can make to your writing is to set aside an area where you write," Clark (1990, pp. 24, 26) explained. "What is essential to your mindset is that your 'office' have an air of exclusivity about it – you're telling yourself that writing is important." These work styles are as unique as any other personal habits. You must find what is right for you. Try a variety of combinations to determine what is the most productive and efficient environment for your writing. Then, as Zinsser (1980) has said, stick to it. The habit of writing counts. It is not so important what constitutes the habit, as shown later.

Getting Your Notes and Research Organized

To be organized in your writing means you are more efficient and probably more effective and productive. Organizing gives focus by giving each story a dominant element (Sweeney, 1993). Organizing does not come easy to some people. Some writers are naturally disorganized people, so they must work harder to get to their writing goals. Arizona writer David Fryxell, author of *Write Faster, Write Better*, believes that. "By getting organized – wresting order out of the chaos of your writing process – you will be liberated to be all that you can be as an author," Fryxell, a veteran editor who has written more than 1,000 international and national magazine and daily newspaper stories about travel, genealogy, and health and nutrition (1990, p. 42) said. "Once you know where a story is going and how you'll get there, it's a lot easier to pay attention to the scenery enroute. In other words, by getting organized, you'll write not only faster, but also better."

There are several concerns when organizing the information you have collected for your article. Remember that the organizational approaches vary depending on the style of writing and the medium, but there are several standard ways of organizing yourself before you even start writing. Often, the best writing comes from taking style and organizational chances and risks (Fryxell, 2004).

Discussions of both common newspaper and magazine organizational strategies follow. Different organizational approaches represent the personality of the writer as much as do the space where you work, your computer and software, and work habits.

Probably the most common way to get the mass of information you have collected is to use an outline to get started. Writers who use outlines have different styles of outlining as well. Some write formal sentence outlines and others use simple topical outlines. Others sketch an outline on their computer screen and fill in gaps as they sift through the notes.

A good outlining plan for beginners might be the following:

1 Think of the main points of the article and make these topics the Roman numerals. These are also your article's main sections.
2 Next, divide each of the main sections into subsections. What are the major characteristics, or concerns, of each main section? There might be just one characteristic or several dozen. List each so you will not forget to include these as you begin to write portions of the manuscript. Identify each of these A, B, and so on.
3 If the article is going to be long, you might want to go beyond the alphabetic items. If you do extend the outline, these will be details of each subsection and they can be numbered 1, 2, and so forth.

4 For longer articles, or articles with sidebars and boxed inserts such as many magazines like to use, you should use separate outlines for the additional parts or maybe put them at the end. Often, after writing the main article, you spot a portion of the main article outline that lends itself to become a "take out" or "sidebar."

These steps will help you to write and organize and they work well for longer manuscripts. Shorter (less than 1,000 words) articles common in newspapers or online news sites might not need this sort of rigorous organizational plan, but even shorter pieces will benefit if you find yourself confused about what you have before writing anything.

Word processing software offers outlining tools in addition to all their other helpful features. This does not mean, of course, that your computer does the outlining for you. However, word-processing software contains features that permit creation of collapsible outlines based on text that you have entered. This way of viewing the words you have written may help you create, organize, and move text more easily. Word-processing software such as Microsoft Word offer such features and more. Another convenience of word processors is the ease of moving things around. If you use a computer to write, take advantage of the flexibility and ease of organizing and reorganizing even at the outline stage.

Ken Auletta, the highly regarded *The New Yorker* writer, media critic, and author, offered one useful index strategy for beginners. Auletta said, "You gather all this material and what do you do? The answer to that is to spend a lot of time doing the most laborious indexing. I put it all in an index and stare at it. Then I move it around and try to figure out what the structure is. I master the material of the "trees" of this forest and then step back, sit with it, and try to figure out what is the forest I want to write about. I start with an index and try to wind up with a table of contents. I always find the key thing is to find that lead. We all do that in daily journalism, but I think it is true of the longer form as well. Get the right voice down, the style. Does it make sense? Does it sum up where you want to go? This indexing is the most unpleasant part of everything I do. And yet, it is the most essential single thing you do" (Auletta, 1997, p. 1).

Reporting Is a Key to Quality Writing

Lisa Gibbs is director of News Partnerships for The Associated Press. It is her responsibility to coordinate the AP newsroom's collaborations with foundations, emerging technology companies and other media organizations. She also manages strategic efforts to use automation and artificial intelligence. She has also worked as AP's blobal business editor. She is a former senior writer for *Money* and executive business section editor at the *Miami Herald*. Gibbs, selected as business journalist of the year by TalkingBizNews in 2016, believes reporting to be the key to quality writing of all kinds. A newspaper and magazine writer herself for more than 20 years, Gibbs believes the two elements must work together for success:

> The best written stories are the best reported. When I'm writing a business feature, I generally interview everyone I talk to more than once and sometimes many times. I make an effort to visit everyone in person, watching for those details that may lead

to unexpected places. CEOs of big companies have media relations executives who coach them and many of them are careful about what they say. I've tried to break through this shield by meeting with them in unorthodox places – while it's important to see their office, get the executives out of their office as well. Visit them at their home, travel with them between meetings in their car, walk the factory floor with them and watch how they interact with employees. Dig into their resume and interview past colleagues, bosses, college professors. Ask them what they're reading, what they do when they're not working.

I like to record my interviews and transcribe them later. Recording frees my hands to have a better conversation. The act of transcribing for me also helps me when I'm starting to write to really immerse myself in the information. I typically read my notes numerous times to let everything sink in, and then I may walk away from the computer and just let my mind wander a bit – in stepping back, I can better see the big picture and figure out "what is this story really about."

I write and rewrite and rewrite again. Like many writers, I often get fixated on the lead of the story and getting it right, and it's easy to stare at the blank screen trying to figure out that perfect first sentence. If it comes, that's great, but it may not. I have trained myself not to worry about that so much. Sometimes I've even just started writing using no notes, getting ideas down and then going back later and filling in the quotes and details. There have been many times when I got to the end of the story only to realize in an 'Aha!' moment that I didn't include some crucial point and I go back to the beginning and rewrite the stop or even restructure the whole story.

Also, just because you interview someone doesn't mean you have to end up including them in your story. Remember, along with telling readers what they need to know, it's just as important to keep in mind what they *don't* need to know. Your job is to learn as much as possible about the topic or the person and then pare it back to its essential core. One editor always told me, "Think of the story as a big oak tree– you need to prune all the smaller branches so that you just leave the trunk." Quotes don't need to run on forever. Don't empty your notebook, craft the story.

(Personal communication to author, September 28, 2008)

Developing the Best Lead

Features employ a variety of leads and organizational plans. You want your article to start well and retain readership for the rest of the article. Leads are tools to hold the parts together, general organizational techniques used in features, developing, and using writing style rules, and point of view. Writing experts Patricia Kubis and Robert Howland (1985) stated that the lead, or opening paragraphs, of a story should achieve three goals:

1 Tell the reader what the article is about.
2 Provide the tone and mood of the article.

3 Catch the reader's attention and entice the reader to go further into the article. Certainly, the lead works with the title of the article and the layout of the first two pages to grab the reader. But the best package of color graphics will not keep a reader unless the author has done a big part in hooking the reader with a strong lead. The lead is crucially important. It can help determine the mood of the article. It should persuade the reader to stay with the article.

The most effective leads commonly used for features include:

1 *Anecdotal lead* – This lead is also called a case-approach lead. The reason is simple: stories with this lead use a specific representative example or story to illustrate a point about a situation that is discussed in general after the lead of the story. Thus, instead of writing about the woes of unemployed oil workers in Texas, this approach would describe one person or family in the lead.
2 *Summary lead* – This lead gives the traditional who, what, when, where, why, and how, or most of them, in as few words as possible. Some summary leads to focus on one or two of these elements and save the others, which are judged less important, for later.
3 *Salient-feature lead* – This lead focuses on one major characteristic of the story. Instead of several points in a color story about a festival, the salient feature lead emphasizes one point about a popular food, unique music performed, or visitors adjusting to unexpected weather, for example.
4 *Quotation lead* – Some writers like to open a feature with a direct quotation. The quotation can be from a person being profiled or an expression of sentiment common at a meeting or concert, but it must be significant and catch the gist of the article while being the exact words of a source important to the story.
5 *Delayed or suspended-interest lead* – This lead deliberately holds the big news of the story from the reader to tease the reader further into the story. It is a lead that works well when there is some question of the outcome of a situation, such as an article about a lost memento that is found or an article describing the sudden joy of a big contest prize winner.
6 *Question lead* – This sort of lead asks a question of the reader, usually in direct address. The key, of course, is to be sure to answer the question with the story, preferably in the top half of the story while the question is still in the reader's mind.

There are still other frequently used approaches to leads. Many writers like to use straight narrative or highly descriptive writing. Some like to employ comparison and contrast for effect. Some use startling statements for impact. You will spot some leads that play on words, using puns as attention grabbers. Also, you might find others with use of direct address as a tool to get to readers who might otherwise find their interest drifting off (Cook, 1991; Garrison, 1990; Uhl, 2007).

The lead should entice readers into the article. Writer Sally-Jo Bowman (1990), who has spent much of her career writing about Hawaiian life and culture, described the work of a good article lead in this interesting manner: "Writing nonfiction articles is like feeding a baby. You warm the little fellow up with a couple of bites of chocolate cake, and when he opens his mushy mouth for more, you cram in some broccoli" (p. 38).

In terms of structure, magazine and online news site feature leads are always not bound by the same rules of newspaper lead writing in that most newspaper editors prefer short leads that are supported by subsequent paragraphs. Magazine and some online news site leads are more flexible and are as often quite long as they are short. Their purposes remain the same, however. Whatever the lead used, it should be a stirring paragraph and must be effective and serve the article's purpose.

Organizing the Story

Story organizational forms are also broad in scope to give you flexibility in fitting the organizational plan to the story. There are variations in approaches, often based on length. There are some differences involving lengthier stories, of course. For magazines, for example, the body, or middle, is the "meat" of the sandwich. Once the article gets started with a well-conceived lead, the momentum must continue. Linking together the pieces with transitional sentences and paragraphs, this is where you must bring in the material that you promised your reader in the lead.

Regardless of what organizational plan you use, your conclusion serves a different purpose. This is where you clean up, wrap up, and tie everything together. In magazine feature writing more than most newspaper, online news, or newsletter writing, the conclusion plays a vital role. It is a chance to summarize the major points again for the reader. It is a chance to reveal the delayed or surprise "finish." It is a chance to give the storytelling its closure. Conclusions can be several pages or several sentences. Regardless of the length, the conclusion should not leave the reader hanging in midair by what you have chosen to say. Reach some form of resolution. Close it out, but be careful of writing too much, as some beginning writers will do.

Remember that you do get a second chance at the conclusion, if you need it, when you rewrite. These are the main time-tested story structural approaches of features:

1 *Essay* – A rather standard approach to all feature writing, this is found in different kinds of features including columns, analyses, criticism and reviews, and other opinion writing. The essay format is standardized with an introduction, middle, and conclusion. There will be many occasions when a combination of these three plans works best for your article. Certainly, there will be some subjects that are best handled by one approach or another but be prepared to mix the best of each of these when the subject calls for it.
2 *Chronological order* – This follows sequencing of events. When a feature recounts events or describes a procedure, this approach might be best.
3 *Inverted pyramid* – This approach might work for some features, but it is best used in straight news writing. This approach is less appropriate for feature material because it is structured by most important to least important priorities. It usually requires a summary lead.
4 *Lists* – This type of feature involves a relatively short introduction, perhaps a few hundred words, and a listing of some subject. Items on the list can be bullet points, italicized, subheads, or even numbered. The listed items should be highlighted in some manner. Each item in the list should be approximately the same length, but the length of the items can vary. Most are short descriptions of the item that is part of the list.

Don't forget transitions between key sections of your story. Transitions are critical for success in organizing your writing, especially in longer pieces. Transitions are often not a priority for beginning writers and they are misused and underrated. They link major portions of an article together in an effective way. These can be road maps for longer articles. They tell readers where they have been and where they are going. This might not always be obvious to your readers. Transitions can be a sentence or two, or just a phrase or a few well-chosen words, often containing the common elements of the two parts being linked.

"Nut Grafs" that Sell the Story

An essential part of many feature stories is what is commonly called a "nut graf" or a "so what?" paragraph. These are used in stories employing anecdotal leads, the lead that is a small story within the bigger story with the purpose of illustrating something. The nut graf paragraph is usually several sentences that sell the story to readers and persuade them that the time spent reading it will be worthwhile. In doing this, we explain that the anecdotal lead story used is an example of a bigger-picture situation. The paragraph also serves as a summary of sorts, telling what the story is about and why it matters to readers. This paragraph functions in an important manner, of course, by answering the eternal question editors ask their writers, "so what?"

These parts of features typically appear near the beginning, but not as the lead. The nut graf can be half a dozen paragraphs into the story, depending on the lead being used and its length. Nut grafs also often give readers the larger view of the issue or trend or behavior being discussed in the lead. We learn, at this point in the story, if it is not already obvious, why the story is newsworthy because of scope or some other reason.

You can create a very strong lead, but few leads truly give focus to a feature article. A lot of writers give different names to that function, but it is a paragraph or sentences near the beginning that tells readers what is really going on. Your article may get off to a great start, but that super lead might not get to the essence of the article. You do that – get to the point of the article – with what is called a *billboard paragraph*, *a nut graf*, or a *summary paragraph*. It summarizes the story and can also answer the "so what?" for readers (and editors). These statements offer your theme or thesis. The nut graf focus statement is short and to the point, usually no more than two paragraphs. Writers will lead with several paragraphs – frequently anecdotal – then pop in the billboard to sum up the main point, the angle of the story. It's not unusual to follow a billboard with a supporting or amplifying graph, or a quotation for impact and validity.

The usual newsmaker profile focuses on a new appointment or other newsworthy achievement by an individual thrust into the limelight. This is the news peg or nut graf for the profile. Something has happened recently to the individual to justify the attention. In addition to spot news stories about the decision and announcement, these profiles serve as sidebars. Editors use them because they believe their readers want to know more about the individual in the news. In travel writing, for example, we do this after deciding what works best for your story for the lead. You can set the rest of the story up by providing some sort of thesis or nut graf. Tell them why they should read on. What is the point of the story? Why should they care about the

dogwoods blooming in East Tennessee in April? Or the side trip to that remote volcano in Hawaii?

This crucial portion of the story needs to tell the readers why they should read the article and what is going to follow. Let them know what you are going to do with their time, even if it is only 5 minutes for a shorter piece, and especially so if it is 15 minutes for a much longer magazine-length article.

Using Voice and Point of View

Another consideration is writer's voice or point of view in your writing. Feature stories for newspapers are most often written in third person, but in some situations, such as personal experience articles, columns, and travel articles, the writing is often in first person.

Remember that when you choose to write in first person, you become a significant part of the story. Do you want to be the focus of the article? If so, choose the first person "I." If not, write in third person or even second person. A key when it comes to voice and writer's point of view is consistency. Don't change voice during a story. Stick to one approach.

Writing with a Stylebook

Style manuals are another writing issue altogether. As noted earlier, they do not necessarily involve your personal writing style. You will find most, if not all, news organizations have their own style manuals or have adapted the manuals of other organizations. Magazines such as *U.S. News & World Report* have their own manuals. Major daily newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune* have their own. News wire services, such as the international Associated Press, have widely used manuals for writers, editors, and students. The regularly updated The Associated Press stylebook has been used in college journalism classes for generations. It should occupy a prominent place on any feature writer's reference bookshelf or be available on a desktop in digital form.

Stylebooks contain a wealth of writing rules and policies (e.g., how to refer to races and ethnicities, basic grammar, or how to write street addresses) that make them the top reference book of many writers. Stylebooks include spelling, punctuation, capitalization, other types of grammar, information formatting, writing and reporting advice and policies, technology discussions, and other helpful information. These are reference books, and many are organized alphabetically by each word or by subject category.

Remember, however, that most major publications maintain their own stylebooks and usages vary from publication to publication. The differences are distinct when newspaper usages are compared to magazine usages. And there are separate sets of writing style rules that are evolving as online news publications mature.

A style guide covers basics such as numbers and names but also more complicated matters such as religious titles, foreign geographic names, and even medical terms. The most widely used writing stylebook is published by The Associated Press. Whether it is AP's stylebook or something else, acquire a copy of whatever book is used by the newspaper, magazine, online news, or newsletter that you write for and

use it. You should notice the professional touch it gives your work if you learn the most common usages, consult the guide regularly about the usages you do not know, and apply the guidelines evenly.

Writing Advice from a Veteran Editor

Jane Wooldridge is the senior director for Journalism Sustainability and Partnerships and an award-winning journalist for the *Miami Herald* who works with coverage of real estate, economy, urban development, tourism, cruises, visual arts, and Art Basel. Wooldridge is also former travel editor of the newspaper and, before that, covered fashion and style writing. She has also worked for *The New York Times Magazine*. During her career, she has covered society news, fashion, and written a regular business column.

As the Summer Olympic Games in Beijing neared in 2008, Wooldridge prepared Sunday travel section cover stories about "the New Vietnam" focused on Hanoi, a story about China's "Red Carpet" welcome to the world for the Olympics that was focused on Beijing, a resident's view of an Israel not in the news, and a view of life in the "heel of the boot" of Southern Italy, emphasizing Puglia. Wooldridge was asked to think about own writing and how she does it. She explained:

> Like most writers, I have a love-hate relationship with writing. Anyone who thinks they just love writing probably isn't tearing their soul apart nearly enough to be producing first-rate work. Not that blood, sweat and tears are a guarantee of a good story … but they're usually involved.
>
> Good writing starts with good reporting, and a good angle.
>
> Let's talk for a minute about angles. Most of us start with an idea … we're going to compare thrill rides at a theme park or recommend the 10 best websites for booking student travel, follow the route of Odysseus through the Greek isles, or (back to our original idea), investigate whether average families think the cost of a theme park vacation has grown too high. Maybe we're going to write about an unexpected corner of Italy or how Vietnam has changed in the 10 years since your last visit or whether youth hostels still offer safe, reasonably priced lodging for student travelers.
>
> In fact, we need to start with an idea. But we can't get limited by it. If the story doesn't pan out, if the information isn't available to support your idea – if there's a lightning storm your only afternoon at the theme park and all the rides are stopped – look for the story that *does* exist. There's always one. The question is whether you're equipped to research it and tell it, and whether the story has been told too many times before.
>
> Back to reporting.
>
> Consumer stories are all about reporting: looking at all sides of a situation or issue, interviewing multiple expert sources, and talking with "real"

people to get real experiences. You find those real people through chat rooms, blogs, friends, acquaintances, expert sources – and by getting out of your room and onto the road. One cautionary note: Be sure the people you're interviewing are who they say they are; on the web, it's just to easy to adopt the guise of a regular traveler when you're really a travel agent, hotel owner or someone with a grudge. (That's why you need to take sites like TripAdvisor with a grain of salt.)

When it comes to storytelling, you also need good reporting. Then you need to get into the world you're writing about and experience it in every way you can. Touch the starfish. Taste the super-hot chilies. Jump on the back of the motorbike taxi. Feel the super high thread count sheets against your skin. Smell the spices in the marketplace. Gag on water shoved up your nose when you're ejected from your whitewater raft. Take a snorkeling excursion or go walking alone on the beach or haggle for a shirt. Make friends. Be lonely.

One thing you should not do is anything that will put you in danger. I've had more than my share of *What Was I Thinking?* moments. Some were merely inconveniences, but others were downright unsafe, and I wouldn't do them again. Nor would I recommend them to anyone else.

So now you've tasted, smelled, sweated up a grueling mountain and have interviewed everyone in sight. You've got the history of the place and know how many people visited it last year and what new attractions are planned. Now how do you make a story of it?

There are a couple of different ways to start out. Here's how I think of them:

The anecdote lead. You put the reader right in the middle of the action, then proceed to a nut graph that summarizes the story you are telling and why the reader should care. Then you put in a little background, maybe a little foreshadowing. You throw in some "sense of place" – help the reader to smell, hear, feel it. Then you circle back around to the action of your story in a way that reinforces the theme you've set up early on. What this approach means is that you must use an anecdote that does have meaning for the entire story. It must illustrate some central point that you are making about the place or type of travel experience. There's nothing worse than getting to the end of your story, only to realize that the initial anecdote, while amusing or interesting, has absolutely nothing to do with your essential theme.

The state-of-the-union lead. First you make a sweeping statement about a trend or situation, then march off down the path of proving your point. For instance: "Castles are cool, museums are not. At least not if you're traveling with a teenage boy raised on SCUBA diving, rollerblading, and golf." Or "Amazing but true: There's more to Orlando than stomach-lurching coasters and high-tech shows."

The example lead: 'In New York, theater buffs line up for hours, perching on benches and curbs around Central Park's Great Meadow, hoping to snag

tickets to that day's free Shakespeare-in-the-Park performance. In the history town of Staunton, Va., Shakespeare fans plop on hard wooden benches in a newly built re-creation of Blackfriar's Playhouse. In Ashland, Ore., fans of the Bard will have the choice of 794 performance this year in one open-air theater or two enclosed ones at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

The question lead: How to get the best deals? Which hostels are best?

The completely fabulous quote lede. I've rarely heard the quote that was fabulous enough to make it a lede. But if someone tells you they were having a great vacation until the stingray bit their nipple, use it.

Here is one approach you should never, ever use: The what used to be lead. Whether it's the history of a place or person, or simply a situation that has changed, you never ever, ever want to start with what isn't. Always start with what is. The 'way it used to be' lead is a snore and a sure way to get readers to pass you by. (Hint: You can get around this with a cleverly worded teasing contrast lead: 'What a difference a year makes.')

A lead and overall structure are your starting points. If you're telling a tale – even if you're offering up consumer tips and advice – think of your story as a conversation with the reader. Don't preach at him or her, have a chat. Be familiar – the word "you" is fine – but don't presume you know your reader *too* well. Give him enough details so he feels, hears, smells the place you're visiting -- but don't overload him with TMI. You wouldn't tell your mother everything you know or everything you did; don't tell your reader, either.

Above all, create a sense of place. Don't just tell the reader about the trip, take him on it with you. In my own life, I write in a frenetic way, often jumping from writing on one screen to e-mail on another (in fact, I often have two computers going at once.) This usually results in mediocrity. So, I turn off the second computer, close the door, kill the music and the television, and struggle. Writing is hard work.

What matters most is bringing the reader along … and that means keeping a pace that matches the story. If the action is quick, the sentences are short and staccato. If the mood is languid, the words might linger a bit more lazily.

Here's the really hard part: If a phrase or sentence or anecdote is getting in the way of the overall story, if it is slowing down the pace, it needs to move … or move out. One of the great sadnesses of writing is that you have to kill your word babies. If you absolutely love and adore a phrase or a description, and you keep changing the words around it to make your baby sing, that's usually a sign that it needs to go. To write effectively, you must be ruthless about your own work. In this fast-moving age of multiple media, spare will serve you – and your readers – better than a bed of flowers. Yes, be creative and inventive … but don't become self-indulgent. Your readers will dump you in a New York minute. (Personal communication to author, September 16, 2008)

Two Writing Examples

Journalist Jane Wooldridge's travel features have been widely read in her home newspaper, but also in other newspapers around the country. Wooldridge's (2007) story about a visit to Israel and how it was given an extraordinary perspective from a Miami woman who lives both in Miami and Tel Aviv follows:

> *Whatever you imagine Israel to be, it probably isn't this:*
>
> *Buttery local olive oil, hinting of spice, sampled on a breezy afternoon beneath a cardamom tree. Chardonnay so crisp you can almost smell the vines. Couples in plush cotton robes wandering the manicured lawns of a mountain-top spa. Cozy coffee shops, cutting-edge art galleries, designer fashions, sleek boutique hotels, cuisine rivaling any South Florida menu.*
>
> *This is the Israel Lin Arison wants people to know. Not just the Israel of labels – Holy Land, Cradle of Civilization, powder keg -- but a living, bubbling land of pottery makers and glassblowers, savvy chefs and* Wine Spectator*-worthy vintages.*
>
> *In this Israel, the Gaza Strip strife that dominates headlines seems a world away.*
>
> *"Everyone who comes here says the same thing, that it feels so safe," says Arison, who splits her time between Miami and Tel Aviv. "There's normal life here. That's the thing that's so hard to get people to understand."*
>
> *It was a surprise to her, too. When her late husband Ted retired as chairman of Carnival Cruise Lines, she says, "I didn't want to come." But she saw that it was best for Ted, who was born in Israel. They moved in 1991, to Tel Aviv, the capital of finance and secular life.*
>
> *He quickly slid into a new business life, establishing a major real estate and construction company and leading the purchase of Bank Hapaolim, Israel's largest. "Linnie" – as Ted always called her – felt like an outsider. She abandoned efforts to learn Hebrew. "I realized at best I would sound like a child," she says.*
>
> *To get comfortable with her new home, Arison began exploring and writing about Israel, first for a business magazine called* Link*, and later, in her privately published book,* A Love Story in Mediterranean Israel. *(A second book about France,* Travels with Van Gogh and the Impressionists: Discovering the Connections*, with photographer Neil Folberg, will be published by Abbeville Press this fall.) … .*
>
> (Wooldridge, 2007, pp. 1J, 10J)

Liz Balmaseda, one of Wooldridge's colleagues and Local section columnist and feature writer, earned the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for commentary for her columns and feature stories for the newspaper's local section each Wednesday and Saturday. Her articles show a variety of approaches focused on people. Her features, written as fixed-length columns, always seem filled with lots of direct quotations from the people about whom she writes. Balmaseda wrote human-interest feature articles for the*Miami Herald* after reporting for the *Herald's* city desk, *Newsweek*, and NBC

network news. Balmaseda said that one of her 10 articles in her Pulitzer-winning submission almost did not get written. She was in Haiti on assignment and went with her photographer to a particularly poor part of the island near Port-au-Prince. She explained what led to the story:

> I went to this village while the photographer took some photos and did not plan to write anything. We went behind this old slaughterhouse and saw a strip of little houses. We went to one to meet a family there. I saw that it was a wonderful look at daily life in a poor, poor place. When we went into the house, I did not plan to write anything, but suddenly, on this hot day, it started raining very hard.
>
> We were trapped because my photographer could not take his equipment outside. So, I sat there and thought to myself, 'this is a blessing.' I had been staying in a nice hotel on another part of the island and was suddenly dropped into a life and culture I'd never come into contact with before. It was the real Haitian life and its rhythms. The man's wife came home soaking wet. The kids from the village were dancing in the rain, but the man protected his kids by keeping them inside. The dynamic of the scene was really incredible. In that moment, I learned what kept life going on that island. In the rain, I saw hope. There was hope in the kids dancing, in the kids catching rain drops with their tongues, in the refreshment they felt from the rain on such a hot and humid day. In it, they saw hope.
>
> I went back to the hotel and thought, 'I can't write this. There's no news peg. No press conference. No quotes. No real news.' But I thought, what the heck? What's the worst they [her editors back in Miami] can do? So, I wrote the story. Of all the stories I did, they [her editors] liked this story best and put it on the front page. They loved it. And that was one of the stories that won the Pulitzer. Something inside me said to take the risk and write that story. I did it. If you have the instinctive reaction – if something moves you – then do it. Follow that feeling. Her story of the man and his family demonstrates a sensitive first-person approach to writing about the political and economic oppression, as well as the indomitable spirit, of the people of Haiti. "It is my favorite of all of them," Balmaseda said. (Personal communication to author, June 28, 1993)

This is her story of one family in Haiti:

> *PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti – Those are the neighbor's children dancing in the rain, thrusting their faces skyward, trying to catch the raindrops in their mouths, singing a song that gets lost in the deluge.*
>
> *Those are not the children of Morales Leger. His children are inside, dry, pleased nevertheless to witness the downpour on such a suffocating day. From his house across the alley, he and I watch the neighbor's girls in their euphoric convulsions, drenched, entranced.*
>
> *Morales, a man of 64, has put out large tin pots to catch the clean rainwater, a blessing on this humid Feast of the Ascension. He pulls his young son close to him, kissing his cheek, explaining that "he easily gets the flu."*

The sudden storm caught me as we talked in his home. Entirely by chance, I found myself dropped in the middle of daily life in a squalid shanty strip where a desperate existence churns on endlessly, even on feast days. The rain hammered on the tin roof, veiling doorways and windows in misty curtains. A shower of relief.

To arrive at his house, I crossed the ancient slaughterhouse, walked along the muck-filled canal where pigs slept. The stench of human and animal and vegetable waste clung to my face like a mask. I took quick, shallow breaths through my mouth.

A young woman bathed in the pig water, scrubbing her arms with a pink bar of soap, as if the rosy suds could extinguish the film of God-knows-what-is dumped- in-there. I had passed more than a dozen wooden doorways framing swollen, naked children. Inside, their mothers and sisters and maybe cousins lounged in a darker dimension. Because this was a holiday, no one was working. Normally, this place is alive from 4:30 a.m. with wailing animals and haggling merchants who later sell the fresh, warm meat at the market.

Then, I slipped into the home of Morales Leger. Within dim, green walls there are two beds over which gauze mosquito nets dangle. There is a pink, child-size potty chair where his youngest girl, Philocles, 2, fidgets, naked.

We talk about his life. He has not worked steadily in years. He was a sergeant in the military for 26 years, though he says he is not a political man. He left the service 17 years ago and has worked odd jobs since. He married a woman much younger, Margareth Coustan, 29. He delivered their four children in his home, on their matrimonial bed. He writes their names in my notebook in a spidery hand: Gina, 8, Philomene, 5, Philippe, 3, Philocles, 2.

He lifts the youngest from her chamber pot, slides a piece of cardboard over its seat, and kisses the girl gently.

"My consolation," he whispers, kissing her again.

Then it begins to rain.

I ask him about Haiti, about politics and refugee boats, and the regime du jour. But he shakes his head.

"It is a divine presence that guides us. That is all," he says, offering me a seat in his home. The rain is powerful and relentless. In a while, his wife arrives, soaked and shivering. She sets down a flat basket of bruised chayotes and mangoes on the kitchen floor.

From what I can understand, she brings back what the market ladies don't sell. A 25-year-old neighbor named Jonny explains that friends sometimes help her buy food.

"She has many mouths to feed," he says. "She has plenty babies."

And another is on the way. Margareth is five months pregnant.

Why so many babies? I ask.

Morales answers for her.

"They are my security," he says, clutching his chest. "They are my future." The gray canal outside his window has become a swift river rushing away from the shanty strip, rushing toward the bay, washing the putrid smells, washing the mud off the pigs, cleansing the woman who bathes in the pig water. After the rain, everything along the alley glistens, and in the distance a rainbow has appeared.

A couple of days later, I watch a storm approach from my hotel balcony high above the capital. The city seems to dissolve gradually into silver sheets of water that sweep inland from the bay, across the slums and markets. I think of the slaughterhouse and the resilient souls who dwell on its fringe.

Probably, they're happily getting wet.

I know I learned something that afternoon at the house of Morales Leger.

I learned that neither poverty nor politics can break the Haitian spirit.

I learned that sometimes it can rain on the most putrid of days.

I learned that in this place where hope is too often elusive, the children of Morales Leger, his hope and consolation, are truly his wealth.

(Balmaseda, 1992, p. 1A)
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of the *Miami Herald*)

Rewriting, Rewriting, and More Rewriting

Some writing experts call rewriting an art form. Authors Pat Kubis and Bob Howland said, "If you are a real writer, you know that rewriting is the name of the game" (Kubis & Howland, 1985, p. 205). Unless you are a particularly gifted writer, you will seldom find that a first draft is sufficient for publication. Most writers find that finishing a manuscript is an achievement of note, but the real work comes in revision.

The best policy is to finish the first draft, then let it sit a while – overnight or longer, if possible. Then read it from top to bottom with a fresh mind and clear head. You can be more critical and make some true improvements in the work. Each time you do this, the manuscript gets better as words are changed or cut, sentences are revised, and passages reorganized. Your goal is to revise until what you have to say flows smoothly. Revise the work until it seems to glide as you read it. Although beginning writers may need more rewrites, as you become more experienced, you will write, revise, and polish to finish an article in three distinct stages.

Rewriting will help you make your thoughts clearer and, at the same time, more efficient. You can use this stage to add information, delete it, or clarify it. Rewriting is a necessary step. Even after that initial surge of creativity in writing the first draft, rewriting makes a significant difference in the quality of your work. Thus, you must make the time to rewrite. It is a part of the writing process. Build it into the article production cycle you use. And remember one key question: If what you have written is not clear to you, how can it be clear to someone else? Rewriting is the answer.

Polishing and Editing Manuscripts

You can also think of rewriting and revising as a self-editing process, but the process is somewhat different. Rewriting means writing it over and over until it is right. Self-editing is making changes on the existing draft of the story without rewriting major portions. The focus here is on self-editing.

There are two ways of looking at story editing. First, you must consider what must be done on your own part to improve your story. This is the most significant portion of the discussion. Second, the editing that another person gives your story draft, also remains vital to the writing process, yet it is out of your control for the most part.

But what can you do to improve your article? What is within your control? One editor has an answer. Phil Currie (Wardlow, 1985, p. 45), a retired senior vice president for news who spent 44 years working for Gannett, offered this checklist of the most significant problem areas to look for dull, wooden phrasing, poor grammar, spelling, and punctuation, story organization, errors of fact or interpretation, holes in stories, completeness, clutter, and redundancy.

North Carolina freelance writer Linda Formichelli (2007a) suggests that all writers take the time to look for use of worn-out words in your writing as you self-edit. She points to several major categories, such as use of clichés, but also overuse of weak words, crutch words that are not necessary, and use of words inappropriately as synonyms and replacements for more commonly used nouns and verbs (e.g., verbs of attribution).

There are other concerns in tuning the first draft of a story. You must, as noted before, conform to the publication's stylebook. You must answer the unanswered questions. You must check for attributions (The Associated Press, 2022a). Finally, as any copy desk chief will tell you, tightening is always a concern about the first draft of a story: watch for wordiness.

Finally, and appropriately, be concerned with the ending. An elegant finish, as Lauren Kessler, narrative journalist and University of Washington professor (2004b, December, p. 34), says can add much to a good piece of writing. "It is easier – if the word 'easy' can be used in relation to writing – to see the beginning of a story than it is to see the end," Kessler, author of 11 literary nonfiction books, wrote. "Endings are a challenge, no doubt about it. But isn't a strong, satisfying, meaningful conclusion worth the extra effort? Imagine your ideal reader. She's sitting in her favorite chair, thoroughly absorbed in your article. She comes to the final paragraphs. This brings the story into focus for her. It leaves her with ideas worth pondering – with an image she'll remember. She nods to herself, then sits for a long moment before she reaches for the telephone. 'Let me tell you about this piece I just finished reading,' she says to her friend" (Kessler, 2004 December, p. 37).



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Part II

Common Types of Feature Stories



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Chapter 9

Human-Interest Features

Just what is a human-interest story? Human interest features carry several labels. Some publications just call it a human-interest narrative. Some label it a true-life drama story. Certainly, veteran *Miami Herald* sportswriter Michelle Kaufman's work illustrates what these types of stories seek to accomplish. Kaufman has been a sports reporter and writer for more than 35 years. She is a Miami native and graduated from the University of Miami in 1987 with a double major in journalism and English. Her career began at the *St. Petersburg Times*, now the *Tampa Bay Times*, where she covered the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and was one of a handful of women covering the National Football League at that time. From there she went to the *Detroit Free Press*, where she spent seven years before returning home to work at the *Miami Herald* in 1996. She has covered 10 Olympics, four World Cups, numerous Wimbledons, French Opens, U.S. Opens, numerous NCAA Final Fours, Super Bowls, Pan Am Games, the World Series, and the National Basketball Association Finals. She regularly covers Major League Soccer for her newspaper and occasionally teaches a sportswriting course at the University of Miami. She has been given national writing awards from the Associated Press Sports Editors, Michigan Associated Press, Florida Sports Writers Association, and she earned a National Headliner Award.

"In some ways, sportswriting hasn't changed much since I started doing it. At its core, the job is still about finding good stories, being a diligent reporter, writing in a clear and entertaining fashion, and covering games under extremely demanding deadline pressure," Kaufman explained. "We always laugh in the Sports Department when the rest of the newsroom makes a big deal about late deadlines on election night. They order pizza, wear sweats, etc … Every night is election night in the Sports Department. Most of our breaking news happens on weekends and after 9 p.m., and sportswriters are often expected to file game stories within minutes after the games end. Sometimes we have to file at the buzzer, and when the score is tied in the final minute, and you are trying to focus while 20,000 fans are screaming in your ear, that can be brutal."

The changing newspaper industry continues to impact her work and her news organization, she acknowledged.

"The two main differences between sportswriting today and 20 years ago is that newspapers are financially strapped and not traveling to cover as many events as they used to. And we are writing more and more for our Web sites rather than just focusing on the printed newspaper. Both of those changes have had a profound effect on the way we conduct our business," Kaufman said.

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"The *Miami Herald*, for example, did not cover the NBA Finals or the U.S. Open golf tournament in 2008. Most U.S. newspapers that used to cover Wimbledon have dropped it from their travel list. In 2008, fewer than a dozen U.S. newspapers staffed Wimbledon. There was a time, not too long ago, that number was closer to 30. What that means is that if we are lucky enough to travel to big events – such as the Olympics, Wimbledon, and NBA Finals – we have to try to find unique angles, local angles, and we have to deliver stories that are beyond what The Associated Press can provide. Otherwise, in these penny-pinching times, editors will decide it isn't worth the investment to let staffers travel.

"Many chains are pooling their newspapers' efforts on big events – both in sports and national news, politics, etc. … so that the *Kansas City Star* and *Miami Herald*, for example, use some of each other's Super Bowl and Olympics stories. Even when we are not traveling, we are under pressure to find original stories, local stories, and anything that cannot be found on television and national Web sites. There was a time our only competition was the other local papers, and our local television stations. Now, we are competing against every Website in the world. Sites such as ESPN.com are great for national sports news and national perspective, but they don't cover high school sports or offer in-depth coverage of every college team, so that is where our newspapers can still be very valuable," Kaufman explained.

"We can also provide unique content if we think out of the box. I have always tried to come up with unusual story ideas, stories that will surprise the reader, whether they be human interest stories or trend stories, something as off-beat as how the Miami Dolphins' laundry operation works during two-a-day training camp practices, or how pro athletes are HUGE closet soap opera fans," she added.

"I love to do off-beat stories, behind-the-scenes stories, where-are-they-now stories, historical stories, personality profiles, basically anything out of the ordinary, anything that goes beyond the stats. My job lends itself to unique stories because I cover tennis, Olympics, and international soccer, and I find international sports far more interesting than American pro team sports at this point in my career. I would much rather write a feature about a cross-country skier from Kenya than write yet another Kobe Bryant feature.

"I also am responsible for coming up with "enterprise" stories and in-depth stories and profiles. In the past year, I wrote about a former NFL player who won a Super Bowl ring and then became an Orthodox Jew, Cuban Olympic gold-medal boxers who defected, Cuban Olympic soccer players who defected, two local immigrant mothers spending their every dime on their daughters' junior tennis careers, gays in sports, the NCAA cracking down on college coaches who text-message to recruit, and profiles on trailblazers Althea Gibson and Mary Garber (a sportswriter who began her career in the 1940s)," she recalled.

"I generally come up with my own story ideas, pitch the idea to my editors and together we come up with a reasonable due date. I do tons of research, and I conduct more interviews than I need to do because that one last interview might produce a valuable gold nugget, a perfect quote, or a compelling anecdote. I write mostly from home when I'm working on features, and rarely go to the newsroom. That is true of most sportswriters.

"The Internet has had a huge impact on how I do my job. It used to be we would hear a rumor or come across news sometime during the day, and we'd have well into

the night to check it out, call our sources, consult our editors, sit back, put the story into context, and write it with care. That is no longer the case. The editors – and more importantly, the Web site readers – want the news NOW, even if it means the story isn't as well-researched or carefully crafted as it would have been under our old deadlines," Kaufman continued. "I worry about that trend. I think it's better to get it right than first, but in this ultra-competitive arena, speed is very important. I just hope journalists won't forget the foundation of the business, the hard-nosed questions, the triple-source checking, the word selection and writing flair. Because that, in the end, is what sets us apart from the local blogger writing from his sofa in his den" (Personal communication to author, October 1, 2008).

Kaufman reported and wrote a front-page feature story for the *Miami Herald* that centered on human situations and decisions that transcend sport. It was a story of one of the most basic human desires – a better life – and the story focuses on a small group of Cuban professional athletes who defected and began the long journey toward a new life in the United States. This compelling human interest story explained how these soccer players were following in the footsteps of countless other Cuban athletes who had defected since 1959. As Kaufman tells the story, readers learn that creating new lives is not simple. The athletes had no money, only few connections, and they had to start their new lives with a blank slate. This is how Kaufman (2008) began her story:

> *A Greyhound bus was pulling out of El Paso, Texas, a few weeks ago when U.S. immigration officers stepped on board and asked for documents.*
>
> *Three Cuban passengers – Yenier Bermúdez, José Manuel Miranda and Yordany Alvarez – looked at each other nervously. They didn't have U.S. passports, don't speak English, and where they're from, the very sight of a government official is reason to feel uneasy.*
>
> *Bermúdez reached into his backpack and produced a stack of newspaper clippings that caught the officials' attention.*
>
> *"Oh, you're those Cuban soccer players who defected in Tampa," exclaimed one officer, who turned out to be a soccer fan. "Bienvenidos a los Estados Unidos!"*
>
> *The players sensed then that their days of living in fear were over.*
>
> *Two months have passed since they and four other Cuban national under-23 teammates bolted from a Tampa hotel during the qualifying tournament for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The three ended up in Lake Worth, under the watch of a former youth coach from Cuba, who let them stay in his house while they figured out their new lives.*
>
> *It hasn't been easy, as Yurisel Laborde, a world champion judoka and gold medal favorite for the Beijing Olympics, is about to discover. Laborde deserted the Cuban judo team Sunday during the Pan American Championships in Miami. The team returned to Havana on Monday without Laborde, who has not made any public appearances but is expected to seek asylum in the coming days.*
>
> *Her first few months as an immigrant will likely mirror those of the soccer players.*

> *They arrived with no money or plans, few family connections – and most importantly, no guarantee they'll ever earn a dime playing professional sports.*
>
> *The Greyhound was headed to Los Angeles, where the trio would try out with Major League Soccer's Los Angeles Galaxy and Chivas USA. They arrived in California with duffel bags, applications for political asylum and work permits, and a burning desire for a better life. The Galaxy gave them a look, and released them after a week. They also had a tryout with Chivas USA, but were let go after two days … .*
>
> (Kaufman, 2008, p. A1)

"This story is about what happened to a group of Cuban Olympic soccer players who bolted from their Tampa hotel in the middle of the night during a tournament. I was in Tampa covering the tournament when they defected, so it was a story I had covered for quite some time and was very familiar with," Kaufman recalled. "In the first 48 hours after their defection, I was able to find phone numbers of where they were staying through my many soccer contacts. I speak fluent Spanish, so I called them and interviewed them, and established a good working relationship with them. When I called back two months later for the follow-up, they were more than willing to talk to me," Kaufman explained (Personal communication to author, October 1, 2008).

"I had a feeling they would be struggling because it isn't easy leaving everything behind and starting anew, even for a young athlete. The story had particular appeal in Miami, where a large segment of the population has gone through similar struggles," she said. "I went out to their practice, watched the entire practice, and then interviewed them for more than an hour. The guys in California, I called on their cell phones. I also spoke to team sources, their agent, and other soccer officials to make sure I had an accurate story. The story got great response, and I even got a call from a documentary filmmaker in Hollywood who is interested in making a movie about their journey."

Human interest stories are, at the foundation, people stories. Retired *McCall's* (later renamed *Rosie*) magazine managing editor Don McKinney (1986) says that regardless of what they are called, human interest features are stories told by writers about people who have been involved in real dramas, and these emotional stories are usually told in narrative form. These articles are quite popular with readers and research shows, and some publications try to balance their editorial content with these sorts of stories appearing with regularity. We see it in the story about defecting athletes by Michelle Kaufman. Editors at the newspaper played it on the front page because it was, at its core, a human story more than just a sports or international politics story that told about major life-changing experiences for the athletes.

People want to read about their neighbors and neighborhood businesses, especially when unusual events occur involving them. They also want to read about celebrities and newsmakers and their lives.

Magazines and online news sites that focus on celebrities, personalities, and human-interest, such as *People*, *Parade*, or *Family Circle,* are quite successful in the marketplace. Freelance writer and non-fiction author Jenna Glatzer believes in this approach. Author or co-author of more than 30 books, she sells her features to national magazines by writing human interest stories and profiles.

"Sometimes, the best way to break into a national magazine is to find a small story," she recommends (Glatzer, 2005, p. 35). "In search of splashy feature ideas, it

is easy to overlook the profile subjects living next door. Interesting people are in demand, whether they're famous or not. Next time you're stuck for an idea, keep your radar up and mine your neighbors, relatives, and friends for profile gold."

A newspaper, magazine, online news site, or newsletter that publishes features about people just for a celebrities page or the entertainment section is just not doing its job. Readers seek more people-oriented writing in their news and features – in all sections and departments and for all formats.

It follows the people who are the focus of human-interest features should be local people, not just people who live a thousand or more miles away. So, what makes people so interesting? Human-interest feature writing is sometimes a catchall phrase used in newsrooms to describe any stories about people. Whatever the focus, these stories are interesting and popular with readers because they focus on people in unusual and odd situations.

Just as all features tend to emphasize the unusual and odd, these stories do so in the most human fashion. People simply want to read about other people. Readers like to see how they compare or measure up to others. They enjoy seeing how others live, especially celebrities, personalities, and leaders in our communities. And as a human-interest writer, you can bring the lives and activities of these people to your readers.

Human situations, problems, and their solutions are the most popular subjects of writers. Everyday occurrences translate into articles and even books partly because you, as a writer, also have that common experience. Your approaches and ideas often come from that base of experience you have had as a child and an adult, and these experiences, combined with your own values, make you a writer about people. For example, someone's quirky personal mannerisms or other behaviors might spark a story idea. As you begin to write human-interest stories, you might have to depend on suggestions from others, but as you become experienced, these stories become easier to identify.

Rick Bragg has established himself as one of American journalism's premier writers. He writes about unique people, extraordinary events, natural and man-made disasters, and social conditions and problems. Bragg, a former national correspondent for *The New York Times*, has also written for the *Los Angeles Times* magazine and its metro desk. A native of Alabama, he wrote human-interest features for *The Times* about the South with a passion and sense of place that only a native can offer. Bragg traveled throughout the nation and the southeast to find the best features for an international audience. He took an issue or an event and wrote about it from the perspective that it became a story of national interest, not just a small town, rural, or regional matter. His effective writing was given national attention when a collection of five of his stories about a variety of people and places that portrayed Southern life in 1995 earned him the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing.

The stories were as diverse as the region upon which they were based. He wrote about an Oklahoma City federal building terror attack, aging prisoners in Alabama, Mardi Gras in New Orleans, and the man who caught the South Carolina mother who killed her two sons. One of the stories was about an elderly woman who left her life savings to her local university for a scholarship fund. It is a compelling story that collected national attention. His story began with this look at the woman and her modest life:

> *HATTIESBURG, Miss., Aug. 10—Oseola McCarty spent a lifetime making other people look nice. Day after day, for most of her 87 years, she took in*

bundles of dirty clothes and made them clean and neat for parties she never attended, weddings to which she was never invited, graduations she never saw.

She had quit school in the sixth grade to go to work, never married, never had children and never learned to drive because there was never any place in particular she wanted to go. All she ever had was the work, which she saw as a blessing. Too many other black people in rural Mississippi did not have even that. She spent almost nothing, living in her old family home, cutting the toes out of shoes if they did not fit right and binding her ragged Bible with Scotch tape to keep Corinthians from falling out. Over the decades, her pay—mostly dollar bills and change—grew to more than $150,000.

"More than I could ever use," Miss McCarty said the other day without a trace of self-pity. So she is giving her money away, to finance scholarships for black students at the University of Southern Mississippi here in her hometown, where tuition is $2,400 a year.

"I wanted to share my wealth with the children," said Miss McCarty, whose only real regret is that she never went back to school. "I never minded work, but I was always so busy, busy. Maybe I can make it so the children don't have to work like I did." People in Hattiesburg call her donation the Gift. She made it, in part, in anticipation of her death.

(Bragg, 1995, August 13, n.p.)

Another effective example of human-interest article writing was published in *Atlanta Magazine* and won a National Magazine Award from the American Society of Magazine Editors as the group's best feature writing selection for writer Paige Williams. Williams, the magazine's deputy editor at the time, told the story of a young Atlanta woman who lost her family, managed to survive a violent war, escaped possible death in Africa and Europe, and wound up with a home and a bright outlook in the Atlanta area thanks to ten different "angels" that Williams said saved Cynthia Siyomvo's life on ten different occasions, one at a time.

Williams, a *The New Yorker* staff writer since 2015, told in-depth or long-form feature story, about 10,000 words in length and written in three parts with an introduction and epilogue. Her work, the judges stated, did what human-interest stories must do: "Without a trace of false sentimentality, Paige Williams tells the stop-you-in-your-tracks tale of a teenager who survived a war, lost her entire family, fled two continents and wound up in Atlanta, where she is helped in her claim on a bright future by an unlikely network of 'angels,' including a middle class family and an indefatigable immigration attorney who plucks her case from obscurity" (*Atlanta Magazine*, 2008, n.p.). This is the way Williams, author of the highly regarded non-fiction book "The Dinosaur Artist" in 2018, chose to begin the epic story of the woman's unusual young life:

She got off the plane from Paris with nothing more than a couple of small bags. The bags had been packed for days as she waited for Eddie, a stranger who had approached her out of nowhere to say he knew all about her problems and could help. For $155 Eddie had given her a passport in the name of Marie-Therese

Ekwa, age twenty-four, from Verviers, Belgium. This young woman, however, was seventeen, and her journey had not started in Paris, and she had never been to Belgium.

It was just before five in the afternoon. Detroit. September 4, 2001.

The airport agent looked at the passport and asked her to state her business. She spoke very little English and did not understand.

Français?

Oui.

She wore her long hair in braids and had on a T-shirt and pants. She stood five-foot-ten and carried her slender height gracefully, almost gliding. Despite the long flight, she had not slept but rather spent the transatlantic journey in conversation with herself: Where am I going? What am I doing? Have I done the right thing?

In an office, an agent asked questions in English and a translator repeated them in French.

Why are you going to Canada?

For my brother's wedding, she answered. Her Northwest Airlines ticket showed Montreal as the final destination. The flight would depart at 9:05.

Where are you from? Where do you live?

She gave an address in Brussels, telling the agents she had lived there eleven years and was a Belgian citizen. I was born in Cameroon but went to Belgium to live with my parents, she explained. They are dead now. I live with my boyfriend. He is a student.

Prove you're Belgian. You don't have other identification?

I lost my bag in Paris, she said.

What is your brother's phone number in Montreal? We'll call him.

I don't know.

Where is the dress you'll wear to this wedding?

My brother will buy it for me when I get there. He is a Canadian citizen and has been living in Canada for twelve years.

By now she should have been making her way to gate C26, where her plane would board, but the questioning went on. Finally the translator said: "Look, we've tested your passport and we know it's a fake. You need to tell us now—what is the truth?"

It was late and she had run out of stories. This business about her brother's wedding, this had come from nowhere. She had not been prepared for an interrogation—she thought she would simply switch from one plane to another

and wind up in Canada, where they spoke her language and where Eddie would meet her. Now, the only story that mattered was the one she most hated to tell.

"Tu comprends ce que je t'ai dit?" the agent asked. Do you understand what I've said to you?

"Oui."

"Do you have any questions?"

"No."

"Are you willing to answer my questions at this time?"

"Yes."

"Do you swear and affirm that all the statements you are about to make are true and complete?"

"Yes."

The time would soon come and go to board Flight 3468.

"What is your full and correct name?"

"Siyomvo, Cynthia."

"What is your date and place of birth?"

"September 29, 1983. Kayanza, Burundi."

"Are any of your immediate relatives living in the United States? Father? Mother? Brother? Sister?"

"No."

"Have you ever been arrested or convicted of a crime anywhere in the world?"

"No."

"Have you ever been in prison in any country in the world?"

"No."

"How long were you planning on staying in Canada?"

"I was going to ask for asylum in Canada."

"Do you have any family in Canada?"

"No."

"Where is your mother and father at the moment?"

"They are deceased."

"Do you have a fear of returning to your home country?"

"Yes."

"Will you be harmed if you are returned to your home country?"

"Yes."

"Do you have anything to add to this statement?"

"I would just like for the United States to take care of me."

(Williams, 2007, n.p.)
(Reprinted with permission of *Atlanta Magazine*).

In the epilogue, readers learn that Cynthia Siyomvo, at age 24, has found a good life. She has started college and hopes to go to medical school. Human-interest stories like this one often help others to understand how individuals or families can cope with unbelievable situations that seem to be beyond human abilities to solve. Williams told the story in such a way that we see how the help of caring others makes a difference. And readers learn that these small miracles occur to ordinary people. Just about everyone benefits from reading, or listening to, a human story such as this. It is appealing reading worth the time to curl up in a comfortable chair and absorb the storytelling.

Human-interest articles should always be based on good storytelling regardless of whether they are happy or sad stories. It is that simple. These articles are the sort of stories you can curl up with on the sofa and enjoy for a few minutes. Readers react by feeling sad for those involved in the tragedy. Readers feel happy because someone has beaten the odds and won a battle against a bigger foe. Sometimes, readers smile because they remember a similar experience they have been through. A human-interest article is often a success because the story that is told is true and involves people in your own town or someone who is just like you, but from a faraway place. Readers find these human-interest articles a change of pace from the normal flow of spot news. Furthermore, these stories serve readers in another way: they offer inspiration and hope for readers who might be experiencing the same troubles or frustrations.

Emphasizing the Human Element

A man leaves his infant child on the roof of his car, drives off to the interstate highway nearby, speeds up to 50 m.p.h., and the baby flies off the car and onto the roadway. No joke. But was it a tragedy? No. Somehow, the baby was not injured. It is one of those unbelievable people stories that needs to be told. And it has a happy ending. It is a "boy, was that a stupid thing to do" story.

However, it was a story that begged to be told. Chris Reidy, a reporter for *The Boston Globe*, got such an assignment. All the elements were there: a man, his baby, drama, and a crazy mistake. And, oh yes, it was Mother's Day and the husband had to tell his wife about the little problem with their baby. Human-interest such as this can be big news, the major story of the day, in fact. Reidy told of the Murrays' miraculous good fortune in the day's front-page lead story for *The Globe*, with a jump-page sidebar on how people misuse car seats for children, written by another reporter (Reidy, 1992). Here is Reidy's complete story:

MILLBURY—After his 3-month-old son sailed off the roof of his car at 50 m.p.h. and landed unhurt in the middle of an interstate highway in Worcester on Sunday, Michael Murray decided to break the news to his wife gently. It was,

after all, Mother's Day, and Murray, a 27-year-old factory worker, said yesterday he did not want to say right out that he had "messed up" by absentmindedly driving off while his son was strapped into a car seat that he had left on the sunroof of his bronze 1987 Hyundai.

As her husband sheepishly held Mathew, who was sleeping serenely in white pajamas and sunbonnet, Deanna Murray, 28, recounted the phone call she received from her husband.

"'Come to the emergency room,' he told me."

A surgical nurse, Deanna Murray was on duty at the Medical Center of Central Massachusetts in Worcester when her husband's call came in. The emergency room is down the hall from her work station. "'Just come down here,' that's all he told me," Deanna Murray said, describing the phone call. "'Mathew has fallen,' he finally said. I ran all the way down the hall."

After learning the full story, Deanna Murray said, "I was in shock. The nurses had to sit me down and hold me. It's a miracle. It really is."

"It's a good thing he didn't tell me on the phone," she said, adding, "Every time I hear the story I could burst into tears."

Deanna Murray heard the story a lot yesterday as the media descended on the Millbury farmhouse where she lives with her husband and two children. The Murrays obligingly went through the details over and over again, but Deanna Murray balked when a photographer requested that Michael reenact the sequence of events with Mathew posed in his car seat on the top of the car.

"You're not going to put him on the roof again, are you?" Deanna Murray said, the only time she expressed a hint of displeasure with her husband. As Michael Murray recounted it, things began innocently enough around noon Sunday when he decided to drive Mathew and his 20-month-old sister to the hospital, where Deanna was working the day shift. He wanted to drop off her Mother's Day gifts—a gold necklace bearing the legend "Number One Mom" and a single rose.

After presenting these gifts, Michael Murray carried his two children back to the indoor garage where he parked the car. Murray put his daughter into her car seat but then got into the car with Mathew still on the sunroof.

"The garage was dark," Murray said when asked how he could have forgotten about his son. Murray then proceeded to drive through the streets of Worcester. Traffic was heavy, he said, but no one beeped at him to indicate that anything was amiss. As he accelerated onto Interstate 290, the highway that cuts through Worcester, Murray heard a scraping sound on the roof of his car.

"You could hear it slide," Murray said of his son and the car seat. "I looked to where he should have been. Then in the rear view mirror, I saw him sliding down the highway."

Fortunately, the driver following Murray does not believe in tailgating. "I was coming over Route 290 South about noon," said James Boothby, 67, a retired

antiques dealer from Worcester. "I saw something in the air. I thought it was garbage, something somebody had tossed out. Then I thought it was a doll.

Then I saw the doll open its mouth. I couldn't believe it. It was a little baby." At this point, I-290 is three lanes in each direction, and Mathew landed on "the driver's side of the middle lane," Boothby said. If Boothby had swerved, the Murrays believe their story would have had an unhappy ending. Instead, he came to a stop in the middle lane, halting the flow of traffic. Boothby said he was driving the speed limit—about 50 mph—when he caught sight of Mathew and his car seat.

"It just landed on the road," Boothby said of the car seat. "It bounced a couple times, but it never tipped—It just sat right down."

Murray, who estimated that Mathew was on the roof for a total of about 1 mile, said he stopped his car about "25 to 50 yards" past the point where his son had become airborne.

With his car blocking traffic, Boothby got out to investigate. What he found was a baby uninjured and a car seat undamaged.

"I picked the little fellow up, and he looked all around," Boothby said. "When he started crying, I knew everything was all right—He looked at me as if to say,

'Who are you?' He knew I wasn't daddy or mama. That's when he started to cry."

"Thank God for him," Deanna Murray said of Boothby. "I can't thank him enough."

Commenting on the heavy traffic that had come to a sudden halt behind them, Boothby said, "It's amazing there weren't any fender-benders." When Michael Murray reached Boothby, he snatched up his son, telling him, "When the police show up, tell them I went to the hospital."

At the hospital, Mathew was deemed to be uninjured, though he was kept overnight for observation. While doctors scanned the son, the father was cited for driving to endanger.

State Trooper Mario Tovar, who issued the citation, said, "I have never seen or heard of anything like this. It was kind of shocking, the whole thing."

"He was a very happy kid, all smiles," Tovar said of Mathew at the hospital.

"The doctor gave him a good bill of health. He's a miracle baby. What a Mother's Day gift! The result was one in a million."

Michael Murray noted that "the doctors said that with the shape of the car seat, it actually flew like an airplane." Murray's car is a hatchback, and its shape may have helped put Mathew into a glide path.

"We're definitely writing to the car seat company," said Deanna Murray.

The seat was identified as a Gerry Guard with Glide, manufactured by Gerry Baby Products of Denver. When not used as a car seat, it can be converted into a mini rocking chair, hence the word "glide" in the chair's name, said company

spokeswoman Stephanie Aragon. The seat is designed for infants weighing less than 20 pounds, she said. Said a grateful Deanna Murray: "The Gerry Glider—it certainly lived up to its name." (pp. 1, 18)

(Reprinted with permission of *The Boston Globe*)

As in this story, the key to telling these dramatic stories is people. A baby. Mother's Day. The ER. The car seat. The expressway. But it is really a people story. The dad. The mom. The baby. The following driver who stopped. The patrolman. There must be plenty of emotions experienced by these people, or perhaps characters, in telling this story, as well as emotions shared by readers: disbelief, horror, amusement, excitement, joy, depression, sympathy, sadness, and anger.

Your assignment as a human-interest story writer is to make your readers a vicarious participant in the storytelling. This one is dramatic. Readers will react to it. You hope the baby survived without injury. You root for the child's careless father to make amends with the mother. Your readers' personal involvement in the news draws them further into what you have written and into the publication generally. These articles are most often the odd and unusual stories about people.

Newspapers occasionally publish human-interest stories in sidebar format to accompany other articles on the same subject. Magazines like these articles to use in contrast with other articles, such as travel articles, profiles, hard-hitting investigations, columns, and the regular content departments. The time element is of secondary importance in many human-interest stories. In fact, some human-interest subjects are timeless and could be published and read anytime, just like the story about the baby in the car seat left on top of his father's car on Mother's Day. Stories such as any of the ones sprinkled throughout this chapter are as interesting to read now as they were when they were originally published.

Writing human-interest stories requires a unique touch by the writer. You must have the right frame of mind to find the story and you need the right strategy to handle it. Approach the usual story in a certain way and it is still only a routine news item. If you take that same story and tell it with a human angle, it comes alive and becomes a better overall story, a human-interest story.

Natural disasters and medical problems are common sources of some of the best human-interest articles. Disasters such as tornadoes that strike in the Midwest, hurricanes on the Gulf or Atlantic coasts, earthquakes, and floods are only a few examples of events that nature brings to test human resilience. Think about the many human-interest stories that were told about caregivers, families, and patients during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Medical cases told from the perspective of those most involved can touch the heart like nothing else, especially if those involve suffering grandparents or children. We tell many stories of children who need organ transplants, those who are handicapped and seek mobility solutions, and those who have terminal diseases are always widely read and usually evoke a strong outpouring of support and offers to assist.

The Association Element

The successes of city and regional magazines and of community sections of major metropolitan newspapers in recent years have been due, in part, to the fact that these

publications are writing and editing their editorial products for local markets. The appeal to readers is broad, but one strong reason for the local appeal is the ability of readers to identify with the people, places, and things about which they read. Daily newspapers publish stories for neighborhood sections focusing on people in small neighborhoods and communities – those within the larger metropolitan areas. And editors fill these sections with human-interest feature material about the neighborhoods' people, churches, schools, and residences.

The same applies to the magazine industry, but in a slightly different way. City and regional magazines in major metropolitan areas have developed to reflect a lifestyle of young adults in dozens of metropolitan areas such as New York and New Jersey (*New Jersey Monthly*, *Bergen*, and *Hudson Valley*), Chicago (*Chicago*), Denver (*5280*), Memphis (*Memphis*), Cleveland (*Cleveland*), Indianapolis (*Indianapolis Monthly*), Palm Springs (*Palm Springs Life*), and Sacramento (*Sactown*). There are numerous others. These magazines filled a void in the metropolitan market also, providing outlets for human-interest articles about leading professionals, local celebrities and entertainment, food and drink, homes, lifestyles, travel, and other stories about urban and suburban living.

How do editors look at human-interest features? For one, editor Don McKinney (1986) identified three main types of human-interest stories:

1 *An extraordinary experience*—This type of story involves the natural disaster such as floods, earthquakes, blizzards, hurricanes, and wildfires. Persons who survive these have a story to tell. There is life in jeopardy or even death. There is suffering. There is property loss, often priceless and precious possessions.
2 *A common problem*—Men and women who experience a relatively common human problem and succeed in battling it have a good story to tell. It may be a singular experience or a family experience. The story focuses on how this person dealt with the tension and stress in a situation that readers can easily identify with while reading the story.
3 *A national issue*—People who suffer because of problems that are on the minds of the citizens of a nation are often heavily in demand and heavily read. This includes public health problems such as the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Beyond city and regional magazines, other magazines also rely on human-interest articles to draw readers. General interest personality magazines such as *People* focus on celebrity human-interest writing. Women's magazines draw heavily on this category of features, often focusing on stories about real-life or true-life experiences. *Reader's Digest* has always used these types of features. Columns such as "Life in These United States" are just one example. Small-town daily and weekly newspapers have traditionally depended on a large number of human-interest stories in their editions.

You can make your human-interest article easier to enjoy by providing lots of direct quotations from the people about whom you are writing. You can also improve the story by giving the reader detail and description, as discussed in Chapter 8, especially when photographs are not used. Direct quotations capture the way the person speaks and, sometimes, how the person thinks. They enliven the human-interest article because quotations allow you to tell the story in the source's own

words. Description makes the person come alive in your reader's mind. How is your subject dressed? How is his or her hair styled? What is the person's occupation?

It all comes down to one point – human-interest articles must be written and edited so readers can find some of themselves in the story. You need to write in terms of people and not in terms of numbers or widgets. Readers do not "see" themselves in a story directly, of course, but they can imagine themselves as the principals in the story. Readers can see this person could have been themselves or is somehow like themselves. The events are described in a way that readers can see them occurring in their own homes or in their workplaces. A reader should be able to think, "Wow! That could have been me!" All of this occurs because of the common purpose, lifestyle, ideas, values, sensations, or characteristics of the human condition between readers and the subject of your article. It is the association and identification element of a human-interest article that permits a reader to think, feel, and even act as he or she imagines the experiences of the person about which you write.

Emotion in Human-interest Features

Emotion is a powerful element in any storytelling. Novelists use it in their work. In nonfiction, it is used to create closer ties between the reader and the story. With emotional elements in the right mix, you might produce one of those stories that readers just cannot put down until it is finished –regardless of the length.

Emotion, psychologists tell us, has four general levels: intensity of feeling, level of tension, degree of pleasantness or unpleasantness, and degree of complexity. Emotion is a strong feeling, either general or specific, about a subject. It is manifested in a number of physical and psychological ways. The most common emotions of human experience are joy, anger, fear, and grief.

There are also emotions that we write about that are associated with various physical experiences such as pain, disgust, and delight. Some other emotions are tied to our own appraisals of us. These include feelings of success and failure, pride and shame, and guilt and remorse. Many times, in reading a good human interest story, you can help readers experience emotions pertaining to other people.

Remember that emotion can be disruptive to your readers. It can be arousing. These reactions link your storytelling to the reader. Emotion is often the difference between an average feature story and an award-winning feature. For example, journalist Dan Luzadder was part of a newsroom team that shared the Pulitzer Prize for the *Fort Wayne News-Sentinel* in 1983. Luzadder's column, part of a group of articles recognized by the award, described the dreams destroyed by a devastating Indiana flood in spring 1982. It could have been any floor anywhere. But the way he described the people involved influenced readers. The impact of his article came from the myriad of emotions conveyed to readers who could identify with his description of destroyed homes, cars, businesses, family heirlooms, and other important possessions.

Stories such as this inextricably link the reader and the story. They do so with honesty and clarity. Writers let the emotions do the job and do not have to overwrite the story to make a point. They remain simple because of the double duty that the emotion element carries in the story. Although journalists seldom write the type of "sob story" that was common early in the 20th century, emotion remains the thread to tie together many human-interest stories. They are stories from the heart.

Getting Involved in the Story

Occasionally, writers encounter stories that must be told but, for overwhelming reasons, they cannot help but become involved in the story. This sort of reaction is quite normal, writers being human, so it might become an asset if handled well. Compelling stories such as these demand that you write first person or write third person with your own perceptions and reactions becoming a part of the article. It is hard, for example, not to react to a child dying of liver disease who needs a transplant.

Writer Madeleine Blais won the 1980 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing for a 1979 article about a man who was a World War I conscientious objector and who had been given a dishonorable military discharge but who sought to upgrade it to honorable status. Blais (1984), who wrote the article for the *Miami Herald's* Tropic magazine, likes to get very involved with the topics of her articles and the sources themselves.

"Sometimes when I do stories, I can really tell that I've done something that's really worthwhile. I can tell it sort of lives very vividly in my mind while I'm doing it. Even afterward, I have this level of caring about the people, almost like a kind of friendship forms because of the story. At some point in the research something happens," Blais stated. "Either somebody says something or there's an event that moves me in some way that seems important to me. And then I start feeling this passion about creating through the reader the exact same psychological steps that I went through to get to the point where these people were moving to me—to do that for the reader as well" (Blais, 1984, n.p.).

You need to remember when you do react to such a story, your own journalistic observations can become affected by the experience. If this is not desired, and in some types of feature writing it is not, William Rivers (1992) suggested a solution. "When an event makes a writer react emotionally, his or her impressions are especially vulnerable to distortion. You can often resolve this problem by recording your impressions immediately after the event to capture its details and then later, at a more tranquil time, assessing your first account to find and correct for distortion" (p. 141).

Finding Unique People Stories

Author Daniel Williamson (1975) stated that most human-interest feature writers are "incurable people lovers." They must, as he says, "relish the strange, inconsistent antics of the human race and, to a large degree, earn their livelihoods by astutely observing and reporting these antics." Therefore, Williamson observed that if a man bites a dog, it is not news as much as it is a human-interest article.

Human-interest stories are often about people down on their luck, the people in society who have been dealt a losing hand, or people who have had a difficult time for no cause of their own. Despite this, we sometimes will see stories about small businesses that succeed, a mom-and-pop food truck that became a brick-and-mortar restaurant, the flea market enthusiast who found a valuable painting, the athlete who hit the winning shot in a big game, and the immigrant who has overcome much adversity.

Individuals with medical problems often fit into the hard-luck category. Cancer victims and their family members, especially, must cope with the tragedy of a life that ends too soon. A physician who treats cancer patients, David M. Mumford, wrote a first-person human-interest story for the *Saturday Evening Post* that provided insight

into the process of dying. He recalled a patient that he once treated who was suffering from melanoma. He described the patient's strong will and desire to fight his fate for as long as possible. In addition to this story of a man who did not want to go easily, we learned an important life lesson from the doctor's experience. This is how Mumford concluded his essay written for the magazine's "True Stories from Medicine" department"

> *One afternoon I happened to visit while his wife was on an important search—an M&Ms' errand of chocolate mercy. I settled into the chair next to his bed as he turned toward me.*
>
> *"David," he began, "let me tell you something. I've been imaging how it would be if my coming death were caused by a stroke, heart attack, or some other abrupt ending. When I do, I thank God I have cancer."*
>
> *He paused a moment and explained. "Without this extra time, I never would have known what love and tenderness are possible between people on this earth."*
>
> *I knew a profound new question challenged me: Is love the essential marrow of our humanness? I also realized an unknown door in the human spirit—one I could never glimpse through scientific reasoning—had opened to me. Suffering, however difficult, can be a wise parent to personal meaning. One person's verities may unexpectedly differ from another's. And, more enduringly, demonstrations of wisdom and grace by patients can reverberate endlessly in caregivers. Certainly, that happened to me.*
>
> (Mumford, 2002, p. 32)

For human-interest stories that are based on human suffering, disability, and illness, the ones that seem to touch readers most, you must proceed with caution. Check medical facts and diagnoses. Be clear about the situation. Medical and legal issues need to be explained carefully and in detail. Some sources may attempt to fool you. Of course, most experiences that are told to you by a source will be true. However, a story occasionally is exaggerated or simply untrue.

Not long ago, newspapers and magazines in South Florida were contacted by a woman who was having difficulty getting public assistance for her ill child. She painted a picture of bureaucratic delays that might cost the child its life. A newspaper reporter checked the woman's story and found that most of the facts were true. Yet, because she did not reveal all the facts about the illness, there were missing pieces. The reporter found out from a physician whom he had telephoned for the background that the illness was serious, but not as immediate a problem as the woman claimed. In fact, the child could expect to live years before the illness turned serious or fatal. The newspaper decided not to publish the story considering the new information. Another newspaper, however, did not check the facts as closely and did run the story.

Children, as you saw in *The Boston Globe* Mother's Day story described earlier, make good human-interest subjects regardless of their plight or location. Although it has been argued that a local human-interest story is preferred, occasionally some stories are so compelling that geography matters little. To find these sorts of stories,

feature writers must keep in touch with the world around them and the people in that world. Stories are found in many places.

For starters, try the local courthouse. Criminal and civil courtrooms are filled with this type of human drama that has, for various reasons, reached the need to be resolved before a judge or jury. The best court cases that make human interest stories have a broader social issue element within them, editor Don McKinney (1986) explained.

Interesting human-interest articles come out of hospitals and other health care institutions. And some even come from both the courts and health care facilities. After the U.S. Supreme Court struck down its 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, for example, numerous writers found compelling feature stories about how the decision was impacting local residents. Some people lost jobs. Some found their health care at risk. Some cheered the decision. Some protested. There was much to write.

Similarly, you can expect to find strong human-interest stories at schools and churches. Government social services offices can often bring you in contact with meaningful stories, too. Each of these is a place where people gather and interact. You can expect to learn a lot if you take the time to talk and listen. Stories to tell will emerge. Established writers know these stories find their way to them. If you are new to a community, it might take some time before people seek you out to tell you their stories, but eventually, they do. Certainly, neighbors and acquaintances often can lead you to stories. Listen to what they have to say. Remember people you meet and where they live and work. Even other publications can produce good ideas for you if you take time to read the newspapers, magazines, online news sites, and newsletters in your area carefully. Reading carefully for run-of-the-mill news stories, you might find a missing angle or perhaps the next step that was not taken.

In searching for that good human-interest article, Pulitzer Prize-winning Massachusetts feature writer and journalism professor Madeleine Blais recommended not heading into the story right away. Give yourself time to look around, even when you have a subject, before you zero-in on a theme or unifying thread. "My technique—was listening, hanging out, absorbing—a kind of inventory. It seemed ridiculous to be standing here stockpiling every little quote or whatever because I really needed more to get impressions than facts," she explained (Blais, 1984, n.p.).

Blais also suggested looking for the little things in your prospective articles. "I love, as a writer," she said, "to take things that are not readily observable as monumental and try to find the monuments in them" (Blais, 1984, n.p.).

Minnesota freelance writer Steve Perlstein believes that human-interest stories often depend on the editor you serve. "Human-interest is dicier [to freelance] because it is so subjective. What one editor thinks is a great human-interest piece, another thinks is just dumb," he stated. "I wrote a piece for *Modern Maturity* about Garrison Keillor and how he puts together his radio show every week. That magazine thought it was a wonderful idea and commissioned it almost on the spot. But when I tried to sell it to other markets, I got nowhere. The second book I'm working on is going to be 300 solid pages of human-interest—the chronicle of the first year of the Northern League, an independent minor league, which one principal has called "the second chance league." It will be made up of young hopefuls passed up by the big-league organizations and veterans who've been released and are looking for another go-round. It's

dripping with emotional potential" (Perlstein, personal communication to author, January 15, 1998).

Inspirational, Motivational Human-interest

Inspirational features are a type of how-to motivational essay. The purpose of such articles is to arouse and prompt readers to take action of some form to reach an objective or goal, to set an objective or goal and strive for it, to get involved in a social movement, to perform on the job better, to stick to a diet, or to break a bad habit. Inspirational feature writers often offer their successful experiences, or the experiences of others, in describing events that have changed a life or otherwise made life better for an individual or group, or helped some people improve themselves, sell more, or succeed in what they want to do. These are typically short articles with strong personal and human-interest elements.

Inspirational and motivational feature articles are a growing interest area for some magazines. Magazines such as *Reader's Digest* use them frequently. One freelance feature writer who specializes in motivational or inspirational human-interest articles is Susanna K. Hutcheson. She uses a very simple formula based on personal experiences for these stories.

"They're quite short really. They're an interesting article to write in that they require no interviews. They're basically an essay based on some experience the author has had that will inspire others. They require excellent writing and an ability to inspire with your words," Hutcheson stated.

Hutcheson, who formerly worked as an advertising copywriter, said she has a formula that results in two approaches to the articles. She follows one or the other in her work: "Often I write a very brief outline before I write. But more often than not, I simply start to write and then do a rewrite and then a polish. I have found that the more of these I write, the less work they require. Most of them are from 700 to 1,200 words and take little time. I try to paint a picture for the reader. I first lay out the problem. In one that I did on insurance sales, the problem was making more sales. Then I use a few quotes from prominent people on the subject, put in some facts and figures, and back it all up with personal experiences or experiences of others. I always wrap up my articles with a summary of what I have said at the beginning. I leave the reader feeling good and thinking to him or herself, 'I can do that!'" (Hutcheson, personal communication to author, April 27, 1993).

Personality and Celebrity Features

The international fascination with celebrities is not new. It has been happening for more than a century. We commonly read articles about entertainment, sports, political, social, literary, and religious celebrities. Many general interest newspapers, specialized magazines, online publications, and newsletters have placed emphasis on coverage of personalities and newsmakers in film, music, sports, and other entertainment areas. This may be most true with certain social media.

You do not have to look far to find people-oriented columns and sections in daily newspapers and online news sites. Many social media platforms are almost overwhelmed with celebrity content in news and feature story form and otherwise.

Newspapers devote prominent portions of news sections, as well as larger amounts of feature sections, to personality-celebrity news. Other publications simply edit their wire or bureau news into personality-celebrity roundup columns featuring short items and pictures about well-known people. And some, of course, exist solely to report about celebrities. Consider the global coverage of the royal family in the United Kingdom, or of Hollywood actors, or of the most popular musicians today.

However, the point is clear – these items reflect the growing public interest in celebrities and personalities. These features tell us the daily activities of famous people – whom they are seen with, where they are going, their latest work, and their personal lives. And, surely, there are emotional stories that can be told about the famous as well. Although these people may be internationally known, or even just known across their communities, others care about them and what happens to them. When a local radio personality falls ill, a popular nightclub singer gets married, or a top actress comes to town, the events become human-interest story material. You write about this in the same way you would handle any other human-interest story. The ongoing emphasis on people stories, combined with the growing attention to personality-celebrity news, is a response to the strong demand for personality human-interest features.

Writing Human-interest Features

You have several writing alternatives for a human-interest story. Much of the time, the material you have collected can dictate the form of the story. Organizationally, you often choose from these approaches:

1 *Suspended-interest approach* – This approach is a pyramid organizational strategy. The lead is only a partial summary of what happened, saving the resolution of the human drama for a later point in the article. Most of the time resolution comes at the ending. The article's body, or main section, is a description of the main events in chronological order. Finally, the article winds up with its outcome, or revelation, in the conclusion or climax. This approach has its advantages. It forces the reader to stay with your story for the big ending or moral to the story. This plan is not unlike that of the novelist who unveils the murderer on the last page of the mystery.
2 *Storyteller's chronological approach* – Chronological order is simple and easy to write once you get your facts and sequencing straight. The sequence of events does the work for you. But it does not fit all human-interest stories. It works well when events culminate with a major action on the part of a principal source in the article.
3 *Narrative approach* – Narrative organization is also easy to use and works particularly well for beginning writers. Like the chronological form, this approach is dictated by the information you collect. Your major decision will be how to start a narrative article because you are not necessarily bound to start with the first event in any sequence. Editor Don McKinney said a human-interest narrative article lead should "lure the reader (and this includes the editor, who will decide whether the reader gets a chance at it or not) into your story and to capture that person's interest so that he cannot put it down until he learns how it comes out" (McKinney, 1986, p. 27).

Narrative organization, then, just tells what happened by running from beginning to end. In this case, narrative is different from the suspended interest because the best material is saved for the end and different from chronological because it does not lead with the first event or end with the last event. You have the most flexibility with narrative writing by not forcing what becomes the beginning, middle, or end through a chosen structure. You can merge elements of the story using narrative organization, pulling from two divergent tracks, or themes, if needed.

Massachusetts writer and professor Madeleine Blais likes to use metaphors to structure her articles whenever possible. "The structure should rise from the material. The way to make it happen is to make yourself an authority, to know so much about your subject that you know almost as much about your subject as your subject knows about himself," Blais said (Blais, 1984, n.p.).

Best Sources for Human-interest Stories

Observing and interviewing people
Neighbors
Workplace friends, acquaintances

Observing and interviewing at institutions
Hospitals
Social services offices
Schools
Churches, synagogues
Funeral homes
Civil courts
Criminal courts

Observing and interviewing in places
Parks, playgrounds
Clubhouses
Festivals and celebrations
Senior citizen centers
Missions, centers for homeless
Schools
Churches, synagogues
Halfway houses, rehabilitation centers
Courthouses
Libraries

Giving a Feature Its Personal Touches

The late Maryln Schwartz, feature writer and columnist for the *Dallas Morning News*, won numerous awards during her long career. A best-selling author of humorous books on Southern culture, she advocated giving a personal touch to her stories:

Sometimes writers find it hard to distinguish between a feature and a news story. This is the best way I can explain it: We all know the biblical story of Noah and the Ark. Just before it rained for 40 days and 40 nights, Noah built an ark. He took his family and two of every kind of animal that was then living on earth. Every living creature on the ark was saved from the flood. That is a news story. If I was writing about that event, I'd want to talk to Mrs. Noah, who was probably having to clean up after all those animals for 40 days and 40 nights. That's a feature story.

When I'm writing my newspaper column, I look for the small details that give the readers a clear view of the big picture. For instance, when Prince Charles visited New Mexico, I wanted to give an example of what it means to be royalty. I didn't want to just write that people were bowing, because we already know that people bow to royalty. So I just watched for a little while. Then I noticed that Prince Charles was the only person at the party who wasn't wearing a nametag.

And this wasn't a "B" Party. Cary Grant was there and he wore a nametag. This is the kind of touch that separates real royalty from mere legend. I did the same thing recently when I was watching the Miss America contestants give their predictable pre-pageant TV interviews. They were all insisting they weren't beauty queens, they had a message to give the world. They didn't want to discuss sex appeal. They wanted to talk about nuclear disarmament. Then I would flip channels to interviews of the presidential candidates. Political analysts kept trying to talk about Michael Dukakis' charisma or George H. Bush's sex appeal. I knew I had my column when I began to realize that politics and beauty pageants have somehow become confused with each other: "Would someone please tell me what's going on? Why is it that Miss Montana can't wait to discuss Manuel Noriega and George Bush only seems to want to discuss his grandchildren?"

To write a good feature story requires as much observing as it does writing. You can have a beautifully crafted story, but no one will really care unless you have something to say. Information is the most important aspect. There will always be an editor who can help you turn a better phrase. But all the editing in the world isn't going to help if your information isn't interesting.

You don't have to have been at a major news event to find a good feature story. And you just have to train yourself to see details that other people overlook. Actress Farrah Fawcett was the most interviewed actress in the country when she was starring in the "Charlie's Angels" TV show. My editor asked me to do a story and to be sure to mention that the actress had been named one of the "10 Most Beautiful" on campus when she attended the University of Texas. The story had been done again and again. I didn't think anyone would even want to read it. Instead, I decided to find out what had happened to the other nine most beautiful. The story went on the wire and was used in about 40 newspapers. I got my information by phone. It took only two days. (Schwartz, personal communication to author, September 14, 1988).

Chapter 10

Writing Profiles

Some profile writers will tell you that profiles are short, vivid biographies. Profiles such as these are much like the efforts of portrait painters or sculptors. An artist paints a lifelike portrait of a person with oils or watercolors. A sculptor might use clay or marble to create a bust. *Writer's Digest* contributor Kevin Alexander (2007) believes that profiles are a basic non-fiction writing form, arguing that "the ability to write a good profile is a necessary skill for any writer" (p. 32).

Profiles often appear in publications when a person becomes interesting to the public. The person may have lived normally or quietly and off-the-radar but is now suddenly of interest to the public. This happens to numerous people each year. For example, consider Olena Zelenska, the wife of Ukraine's president. Until Russia invaded Ukraine in early 2022, few people outside Ukraine knew of her or about her. But in a war-torn nation, she has become newsworthy, she has become interesting to readers in Europe and around the world. *Vogue* magazine profiled her several months after the conflict began, telling readers about her life and its remarkable ups and downs. Rachel Donadio wrote the story and Annie Leibovitz took the photographs. Introducing her to readers, Donadio's story began this way:

> *There is no script for first ladies in wartime, and so Olena Zelenska is writing her own. The wife of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy, a longtime comedy writer, always preferred to stay behind the scenes, while her husband, a comedian turned politician whose presidency may yet determine the fate of the free world, glowed in the limelight. But ever since Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, Zelenska has suddenly found herself center stage in a tragedy. When I met her on a recent rainy afternoon in Kyiv, where cafés were busy even amid frequent air-raid sirens, her luminous face and green-brown eyes seemed to capture the range of emotions coursing through Ukraine today: deep sadness, flashes of dark humor, recollections of a safer, happier past, and a steely core of national pride.*
>
> *"These have been the most horrible months of my life, and the lives of every Ukrainian," she said, speaking her country's language through a translator. "Frankly I don't think anyone is aware of how we have managed emotionally." What inspires her, she told me, is her fellow Ukrainians. "We're looking forward to victory. We have no doubt we will prevail. And this is what keeps us going."*

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> *I met Zelenska – surnames are gendered in Slavic languages – deep inside the presidential office compound, a heavily guarded place I had traveled long hours to reach. With Ukraine's airspace closed to civilian flights, I took an overnight train from Poland, through landscapes that have seen some of the 20th century's worst horrors. Once inside the compound, I passed multiple security checkpoints and a labyrinth of blacked-out corridors lined with sandbags and soldiers. Life in wartime.*
>
> *From the start, this war has been fought both on the ground and in the information space, where Zelenskyy – savvy, telegenic, down-to-earth in his famous olive-drab T-shirts – has excelled. Now, in a crucial new phase, with Ukraine battling for international support and fresh military aid, the first lady's role is no longer minor or ornamental. After spending the first months of the war in hiding, Zelenska, who, like her husband, is 44, has emerged into public view to become a face of her nation – a woman's face, a mother's face, an empathetic human face. If Zelenskyy leads a nation of civilians who overnight turned into combatants, she has visibly carried their emotional toll …*
>
> (Donadio, 2022)

Through her first-person description, her quotations, and her background research, Donadio introduces us to Zelenska. We get to know her. And about her. And life in wartime. It is a substantial read. We get an in-depth look at this individual. Profiles may be lengthy, seemingly book-length magazine pieces as well, approaching that of a biography.

Vanity Fair writer Evan Wright's profile of the up-and-down-and-up-again Hollywood talent agent Pat Dollard is an example. Wright's piece, an enormous long-form piece running 23,500 words, is atypical of most profiles. But his editors at the award-winning magazine felt the treatment of this unusual Hollywood agent was worth the space. *Vanity Fair*, a perennial award winner as one of the best-written and edited magazines in the United States, publishes long-form pieces on a regular basis and many are profiles. Wright, the author of non-fiction books and a contributor to *Rolling Stone*, won the National Magazine Award for profile writing with the article, presented by the American Society of Magazine Editors for writing that illustrates "the vividness and perceptiveness with which the writer brings his or her subject to life." Wright is known for his use of immersion journalism, diving deeply into sub-cultures of different groups such as radical environmentalists. We can see the depth and detail of Wright's approach in the profile of Dollard:

> *But Dollard was not planning a suicide, at least not a quick one. Dressed in what he would later describe as his "scumbag hipster agent's uniform" – Prada boots, jeans, and a black-leather jacket-he boarded a plane for New York, then Kuwait City. From there he hopped a military transport to Baghdad and embedded with U.S. Marines in order to make a "pro-war documentary." Given the decades of substance abuse, the idea of the chain-smoking, middle-aged Hollywood agent accompanying Marines into battle was sort of like Keith Richards competing in an Ironman Triathlon. But Dollard thrived. "My first time in a combat zone, I felt like I had walked into some bizarre fucking ultra-expensive movie set," he would later say. "I had this vivid clarity, like when I used to take LSD. I felt joy. I*

> *felt like I had a message from God, or whoever, that this is exactly what I should be doing with my life. I belong in war. I am a warrior."*
>
> *To those at home it seemed that Dollard had entered dangerous mental territory. Around the New Year in 2005, he e-mailed a photo of himself to friends. In it he is clutching a machine gun, surrounded by Marines. Dressed in combat gear, his hair in a Mohawk and the word "die" shaved into his chest hair, Dollard looks like the mascot of camp Lord of the Flies.*
>
> (Wright, 2007, n.p.)

As a profile writer, you can also create a portrait of a person using your command of some unique communication tools – words and descriptive language. Still, personality sketches and profiles are a bit different from even longer biographies and different from other portrait art forms. Obviously, a feature profile for a news organization will not be as substantial as a book-length biography. Some newspaper, magazine, online news, and newsletter profiles do run thousands of words, such as Wright's look at Dollard, and some are even published in installments. Others are excerpts from upcoming book-length studies of individuals – new biographies. Most, however, are much shorter – in the 750-word to the 1,500-word range – and more concentrated and focused. And profiles, of course, should focus on the person being profiled and rarely involve the writer (Alexander, 2007).

Magazine writer Tom Callahan said profiles are a hard craft to master, but they can be highly rewarding for writers and their readers. "Profile writing is fun," Callahan said. "Where else can an ordinary person like yourself end up interviewing French actresses, powerful politicians, and other exciting, beautiful people? Such assignments give you a backstage pass, a ticket to go places few of us would otherwise see and to glimpse lifestyles others only envy" (Callahan, 1995, p. 40).

North Carolina freelance writer Linda Formichelli (2007b) says a strong profile is based on research, is not just told in chronological order, has a strong emotional core, and reveals both good and bad and public and private characteristics and elements to the person being profiled. Author Daniel Williamson (1975) called profiles in-depth stories about an individual designed to capture "the essence of his personality" (p. 151).

Profiles have been a part of the nonfiction writer's portfolio for generations. Magazines in New York, particularly *Vanity Fair* and *The New Yorker*, began to publish personality-based stories labeled profiles. Their readers thumb through new issues, looking for profiles to see who's who. Personality sketches and profiles are important feature articles in the overall content mix of newspapers, magazines, online news sites, and newsletters. Wire services and other news organizations use them to introduce unfamiliar newsmakers to readers almost daily. Someone not widely known who has just received a high federal government nomination or appointment is almost guaranteed to be profiled by major news organizations. Consider the coverage for new U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson in 2022. When she was nominated, she was little known outside the legal community.

This treatment of newsmakers also occurs at the local level, of course. New public officials, especially appointed individuals, are profiled on page 1. People announcing a candidacy for city or county public office get similar attention. So do star athletes having a good season or who have just completed a record effort. Award-winning

singers and musicians are commonly profiled for the entertainment section. Specialized magazines regularly present profiles of industry or professional leaders and newsmakers to their readers in sections devoted to highlighting individuals.

The usual newsmaker profile focuses on an individual thrust into the limelight. This is the news peg or nut graf for the profile. Something has happened recently to the individual to justify public interest and attention. In addition to spot news stories about a decision and announcement, these profiles serve as sidebars to coverage. Editors use them because they believe their readers want to know more about the individual.

Although most profiles focus on people, profiles are not solely about people. You can find profile treatments of cities, schools, restaurants, companies, businesses, sports teams, management teams, musical groups, acting or dance companies, and committees. These organizational and institutional profiles are popular in certain sections of publications such as business, sports, and entertainment. For example, *The New York Times* writer Suleman Anaya, for example, recently profiled New Haven, Conn., to tell its *T Magazine* – the newspaper's style magazine – arts issue readers about how the Connecticut city has emerged as an affordable and dynamic home for many different types of artists. The ability to produce a profile is a necessary skill for a versatile nonfiction writer. This story form should be a part of your standard feature writing repertoire. This chapter describes the basics of the profile and personality sketch and outlines the approaches to writing these stories. Your first stop is with the most common elements of writing profiles.

Basic Profile Content and Structure

Profiles have common content and generally follow a standard organization. You will find variations, of course, but most profiles include certain basic information. The result is a structure that has evolved over the years. When profiling an individual, whether it is for a newspaper, magazine, online news site, or newsletter, you should include some biographical material offered in a mostly chronological order, an environment or surroundings description, anecdotes, or brief stories by and about the subject, current personal information, and, for some publications, family information. A combination of these elements should produce a full, insightful picture of the individual or subject.

Writing the story will be easiest to do if you follow the general plan for a profile. After you have done one or two, you will probably begin to experiment with other approaches as well as other means of focusing on an individual.

A standard profile can have several purposes and forms. It should be a narrative story of 750 to 1,500 words, for a newspaper, but may run longer for magazines, online news sites, or newsletters. Many publications are also publishing profiles in capsule form, labeled thumbnails or sketches by some editors. These are very short versions of a profile that present only the key relevant facts. Some may even use a short summary, a listing, or a resume format.

The Basic Parts of Profiles

A traditional profile has five basic parts:

- Lead paragraphs, typically an anecdotal or highly descriptive lead.
- "News peg" or "nut graf" outlining spot developments of significance.

- Subject's current successes and accomplishments.
- Biographical chronology.
- Ending or conclusion, often connecting to the lead.

The lead can be built by using several parts or only one component. Like other articles, it is two or three paragraphs that are interest-arousing for the reader. These can be stirring quotations, a dramatic scene description, or a telling anecdote. The lead should melt into the current accomplishments portion through an effective transition. That is the article's news peg. This is where you tell your reader: Therefore, you should read about this person. This is the point of the story where you describe the subject's achievements and responsibilities.

Christopher Kelly, *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* film critic and a contributor to *Texas Monthly* magazine, sat down with the late award-winning actor Robin Williams. He decided to approach his profile of Williams by stating that movie fans either loved him or hated him, but regardless of their reaction to his films, he always generated some sort of reaction. His portrayal of Williams in a Friday cover feature for the *Star-Telegram's* Weekend Life & Arts section, illuminated the actor's serious side and offered his views about his craft. Kelly used a basic essay and narrative structure.

> *When you talk to Robin Williams in person, he is not the man you'd expect. Or at least he is not entirely that man.*
>
> *Yes, there is much of his famously discursive, rapid-fire comedy; within one fractured train of thought, he can bounce from an impression of Miss Cleo the television psychic to an extended riff on "wet burka contests."*
>
> *But once Williams starts talking about his approach to acting – particularly how he tackled his role as the psychotic photo developer Sy Parrish in One Hour Photo (opening in wide release today) – he turns focused and very serious.*
>
> *"His isolation is triggered by pretty horrible abuses as a kid," he says, talking to a group of reporters at the Sundance Film Festival, where One Hour Photo premiered in January. "There's a psychological disorder called Asperger's syndrome. You can't deal directly with people, but you're very good with mechanical things, and you relate to people through objects. I used that as a template."*
>
> *Williams is a famously intense comedian, and he also seems to apply that same intensity to his serious roles. That's precisely what makes his career both fascinating and frustrating. His performance in One Hour Photo is one of his most mannered and deliberate. It also marks his third film this year – after Death to Smoochy and Insomnia – in which he plays a bad guy. And this particular cycle of movies follows a series of sentimental dramas in which he played basically the same holy fool over and over again, in Jakob the Liar, What Dreams May Come, Bicentennial Man and Patch Adams.*
>
> *Williams doesn't do anything halfheartedly. He doesn't let you miss his point.*
>
> *"I'm trying to get different colors going," Williams says, by way of explaining his decision to star in One Hour Photo, Insomnia and Death to Smoochy in the same year. The question for a lot of people, however, is: Is Williams trying too hard?*

"He's got a wonderful career, he's a megastar," says Mark Romanek, the director of One Hour Photo. "But like any creative person in any endeavor, he's looking to grow. The guy has made 40 or 50 movies. He's running out of new challenges." That's the politic answer to why Williams has made such a glaring 180-degree turn from movies like Patch Adams to ones like Insomnia. For his part, the actor says that the reason he's playing three bad guys back to back is because he wanted to try something new.

"I've never been offered too many chances like this," Williams says. "One was Dead Again [1991]. I did The Secret Agent [1996], because that was Bob Hoskins' movie, and it was also Joseph Conrad, and it was a great despicable character. But I haven't had a chance to play these characters. So when [my agents] found this film, I thought, this is great."

But why doesn't Williams take the approach of someone like Jim Carrey, an actor who now alternates steadily between broad farce and serious drama. Why, for Williams, is it always aggressively one thing or aggressively the other?

In a scathing critique of the actor in the August issue of Esquire, *the critic Tom Carson suggests that Williams' defining trait as an actor is a need to overdo things. "[Williams'] fatal flaw … is that he's always overcompensating; whenever he gets anxious that our attention is slipping, we've got to brace ourselves for a whole new form of excess. His current pursuit of the charms of villainy is no exception." Boston Globe film critic Ty Burr, in his negative review of One Hour Photo, postulates that Williams has always been the tearful clown longing for adulation.*

He writes, "Robin Williams has a raging need for love that fuels his best work as a comedian and his worst work as a film actor."

The irony, of course, is that Williams has never gone without audience adulation, or critical respect, for very long. Tom King, who writes the "Hollywood Journal" column for The Wall Street Journal, points out that with a string of $100-million hits (Mrs. Doubtfire, Jumanji, Patch Adams) and Oscar recognition (nominations for Good Morning, Vietnam; Dead Poets Society; Awakenings and The Fisher King; the Best Supporting Actor prize for Good Will Hunting), Williams didn't need to undertake the sort of radical career makeover he's attempted this year.

"He is not someone whom I think of as being in 'star jail,'" says King. Williams' recent choices are those of an actor trying to avoid falling into a trap that isn't really there – which ends up being a trap in and of itself. Indeed, this current makeover might not have been necessary at all had Williams not served up four consecutive movies that followed the same grossly sentimental Patch Adams model.

There is, to be fair to Williams, the fact that no actor wants to be typecast. Says Charles Lyons, the film reporter for Variety, "Robin Williams, like all actors, doesn't like to get straitjacketed into one kind of role. That's what agents and producers try to do with actors, directors, etc., in an environment that has become increasingly corporatized."

But it must also be noted that Williams is partly responsible for his own typecasting. He can play all the Sy Parrishes he wants, but if he shows up to promote those films on talk shows and immediately resorts to his patented, caffeinated routine, audiences aren't ever really going to see him in a different light. More to the point, by making four "nice guy movies," followed by three "bad guy" movies, he shoots himself in the foot – by playing into the carefully defined, know what-you're-getting-in-advance rules of Hollywood.

Will Williams' bad-guy cycle result in a backlash among both critics and Oscar voters, who likely will see his work not on its individual merit but as part of a calculated stunt? Williams has received generally favorable reviews for One Hour Photo, as he did for Insomnia. (Death to Smoochy was so badly directed and written that it seems unfair to pass judgment on Williams' performance.) But Tom Carson's criticisms of One Hour Photo have been echoed in a number of other reviews of the film.

That's a shame, because for all its ostentation (in fact, precisely because of all its ostentation), Williams' work in One Hour Photo ranks with his most fascinating. Williams has thought Sy through from top to bottom – the awkward staccato walk, the half-beatific, half-menacing smile, the way he pushes his glasses up against the bridge of his nose whenever he is nervous. Sy turns out to be another of Williams' characters who desperately needs attention. And Williams' shtick becomes the means by which the actor forces us to notice a man most of us would never notice in our everyday life.

Based on its success in limited release thus far, One Hour Photo certainly looks like a hit, providing Williams the last laugh. But Tom King says that Williams is ultimately too mercurial – and audiences are too in love with his comic talents – for the actor to remain a bad guy for long.

"I would expect that at some point in the near future, we'll see Robin Williams back in a dress," he says. "That's what the audience wants. And usually studios and agents, and the people in power in Hollywood, are able to convince stars to give them what they want – even if it's not what the star wants to do."

(Kelly, 2002, pp. 1E, 7E) (Reprinted with permission of the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*)

After the lead paragraphs, the story next establishes its news value. This is a "so-what?" or "nut graf" that was discussed in Chapter 7. Kelly does this effectively in his story by noting that the latest Williams film opened on the day his story appeared. The story is immediately timely and newsworthy. There are other ways to do this. For example, what is the person doing? Why is this individual in the news? The above examples lay this out early in each story.

This approach also serves as a form of transition from the lead to the middle or body of the story. With an effective transition from the lead, you move to the portion of the story where the current and past personal background on the individual is presented. How did the individual get to where he or she is? This is a biographical section, told mostly in chronological order from childhood (or the beginning of a professional career, perhaps) to present. This usually demands the variety of sources

necessary in a profile to give a complete picture. But beware – this section can be dull unless it is spiced up with anecdotes and direct quotations, even some storytelling by the subject or others close to the subject.

The ending is linked to the rest of the article in several ways. The most common method is to bring the reader back to the present in the chronology, connecting with the points made in the news peg section. Another method is to link up with an anecdote offered in the lead or some other observation made by you, the subject, or another source, near the beginning of the article.

Profiles can also be of organizations or other entities. As noted, we see profiles of institutions, businesses, movie casts, musical groups, television shows, and their casts, and even cities. Margaret Fuhrer, editor-in-chief and producer of *The Dance Edit* newsletter and podcast and the former editor-in-chief of *Dance Spirit*, wrote a recent profile of, surprisingly, a minor league baseball team, for *The New York Times*. Her story, headlined, "'Baseball Players Don't Dance'? The Savannah Bananas Beg to Differ," to tell the unique story of a collegiate summer league baseball team in Georgia and its use of TikTok choreography and a ballet-trained first base coach to build a growing following through entertainment (Fuhrer, 2022):

> *How does a dance writer from the Northeast end up fixated on a collegiate summer league baseball team from Savannah, Ga.?*
>
> *A few months ago, a video of a baseball coach dancing to "Waltz of the Flowers" – concluding with a virtuosic series of pirouettes – showed up in my Twitter feed. Before long, I started seeing choreographed content from the team on TikTok: an umpire doing 'N Sync's "Bye Bye Bye" dance after calling a strikeout. A batter "hitting the Quan" before scoring a base hit. A pitcher, second baseman, shortstop and center fielder dancing the "Cool for the Summer" TikTok challenge during an at-bat. And there was more ballet.*
>
> *Everywhere I scrolled, there were the Savannah Bananas – dancing.*
>
> *Whatever your connection (or lack thereof) to baseball, the Bananas are here to entertain you. While major-league games are getting longer and slower, frustrating even devoted fans – Don Mattingly, the manager of the Miami Marlins, recently said the sport "sometimes is unwatchable" – the Bananas are focused squarely on fun. For viewers like me, they're the most watchable team in baseball.*
>
> *When the Bananas aren't dancing, they're wearing stilts, crowd surfing to the plate or singing karaoke on the field. A cast of 120 entertainers adds to the circus" … .*
>
> (Fuhrer, 2022, *n.p.*)

Basic Profile Information Checklist

Biographical Material

- Birth date, birthplace
- Schooling
- First job, other positions held

- Family (parents, brothers, sisters)
- Childhood friends

News Hook Information

- Promotions, appointments, advancements
- Awards, honors, citations

Present Situation

- Environment and surroundings
- Home, workplace description, decor
- Former living and working environments (for contrast)

Physical Characteristics

- Physical appearance of person
- Mannerisms
- Clothing style
- Hairstyle

Anecdotes and stories
Embarrassing moments
Greatest accomplishment
Memorable first times
Family

- Spouse, marriage information
- Previous marriages, commitments, or other relationships
- Children, ages, and names
- In-laws
- Pets

Personal

- General lifestyle, philosophies of living
- Plans for future
- Personal Web sites
- Social media pages
- Dreams and fantasies
- Hobbies, special interests
- Favorite foods and music
- Recreational activities
- Religion
- Military service
- Volunteer work or other civic or community service
- Club memberships
- Major traumas and problems (current or past)

A Difference in Purpose

Art Spikol, a Pennsylvania editor, writer, designer, and former executive editor of *Philadelphia* magazine, noted there is a clear distinction between the interview story and the profile. "Even if the terms are occasionally used interchangeably by beginning writers, the fact is that the two types of writing bear little resemblance to one another," he observed (Spikol, 1979, p. 7).

Spikol, who was also a contributing editor and writer for *Writer's Digest* for almost three decades, said an interview is just that, a conversation with someone. "A profile is something else: It is an article whose main subject is a particular person, and it is rarely based exclusively on an interview or on interviews with that person. In fact, profiles are probably at their least expository – and writers at their laziest – when written with information supplied by their subjects," Spikol said. "After all, no subject – particularly one with some sophistication dealing with the press – will supply information that might be damaging or embarrassing; the only anecdotes the writer will get will be those the subject wishes to share" (p. 7).

Profile Tone and Writing Approach

Do you have to love the subject of your story? Trash him or her? Profiles should not be entirely positive or laudatory. Most are neutral or balanced in presentation. In fact, some profiles are written about a person who has been responsible for criminal activity or other socially unacceptable behavior, such as writer Ken Auletta's work about disgraced film executive Harvey Weinstein. Your readers are likely quite interested in these persons as well.

Some profiles seem to write themselves, up to a point. You simply describe the latest news and interesting aspects of the past about the person. It is possible, editor Art Spikol said, you might wind up without a good ending. "Profiles are like that. You have swooped down on a subject and caught him at a certain point in time; naturally, you'll have to swoop away and leave him to act out the rest of the script. About all you can do is speculate a little about the subject's future" (Spikol, 1979, p. 10).

Writer Tom Hallman Jr., a veteran writer for *The Oregonian* in Portland, told the remarkable story of a young man with a severe facial disfiguration and a high level of sensitivity. He achieved this with an overall respectful tone. Hallman, author of four books, is a writing teacher and frequent contributor to *Reader's Digest*. His stories explore shared humanity, consider the important moments of people's lives, and introduces readers to memorable characters.

Hallman won the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing for the story. He spent almost a year working on his story about Sam, "the boy behind the mask," spending hours with the boy and his family and hours with documents, medical records, family journals, and diaries. He spent considerable amounts of time traveling from Portland to the East Coast with Sam and his family to see doctors, and even more hours just hanging out at the family home. He even spent time going to school with Sam. The resulting four-part series, published over consecutive days, was an emotional and poignant profile of the 14-year-old and his decision to undergo life-threatening surgery to improve his appearance.

Hallman, a former police beat reporter, described scenes with exquisite detail, quoted Sam and his family and friends, and witnessed almost all major events during the period leading up to and following the delicate operation. The first installment in the series began this way:

> *The boy sits on the living room sofa, lost in his thoughts and stroking the family cat with his fragile hands. His younger brother and sister sit on the floor, chattering and playing cards. But Sam is overcome by an urge to be alone. He lifts the cat off his lap, ignoring a plaintive meow, and silently stands, tottering unsteadily as his thin frame rises in the afternoon light.*
>
> *He threads his way toward the kitchen, where his mother bends over the sink, washing vegetables for supper. Most 14-year-old boys whirl through a room, slapping door jambs and dodging around furniture like imaginary halfbacks. But this boy, a 5-foot, 83-pound waif, has learned never to draw attention to himself.*
>
> *He moves like smoke.*
>
> *He stops in the door frame leading to the kitchen and melts into the late-afternoon shadows. He watches his mother, humming as she runs water over lettuce. The boy clears his throat and says he's not hungry. His mother sighs with worry and turns, not bothering to turn off the water or to dry her hands. The boy knows she's studying him, running her eyes over his bony arms and the way he wearily props himself against the door frame. She's been watching him like this since he left the hospital a few months before.*
>
> *"I'm full," he says.*
>
> *She bends her head toward him, about to speak. He cuts her off.*
>
> *"Really, Mom. I'm full."*
>
> *"OK, Sam," she says quietly.*
>
> *The boy slips behind his mother and steps into a pool of light. A huge mass of flesh balloons out from the left side of his face. His left ear, purple and misshapen, bulges from the side of his head. His chin juts forward. The main body of tissue, laced with blue veins, swells in a dome that runs from sideburn level to chin. The mass draws his left eye into a slit, warps his mouth into a small, inverted half moon. It looks as though someone has slapped three pounds of wet clay onto his face, where it clings, burying the boy inside.*
>
> (Hallman, 2000, n.p.)

The complete series may be read at http://www.pulitzer.org/year/2001/feature-writing/works/.

The Subject as Source

How do you choose the right person or subject for a profile? How do we define newsworthiness? People and organizations are chosen for profiles because they are doing something we judge as newsworthy. Because of what has happened to him or

her or what the person is doing, something timely perhaps impacting many others, these persons are thrust either voluntarily or involuntarily into the public eye and readers want to learn more about them. Judgments to assign a profile by editors are usually based on recent developments or the significance of what has happened, or both, in the person's personal or professional life.

As noted earlier, people are not the only subjects of profiles. Cities, for instance, can be profiled, or institutions, groups, or organizations. Such an article uses the same basic content described for profiles of people – multiple sources, observations, a chronological summary of recent history, and factual support for generalizations (a university study, for example, among other sources). In choosing a subject, you should consider that a person would be a good candidate to be profiled if the individual is well known. An individual may be popular because of his or her professional activities, or the person may be controversial because of a position on an issue that may divide a profession, community, or even a family.

Another reason to profile someone is because the person has reached a new level in his or her career or personal life. This means there has been a promotion, a significant accomplishment, a major career change, or another step recently taken. You also want to select an individual based on leadership. The sort of person often profiled is an industry or professional leader who serves as a role model.

You should consider individuals for their talkative nature. A profile often is, in part, based on the thoughts of the person being highlighted. Someone who is not so open about their views, for example, might not provide you with strong material for your story. Furthermore, it is also helpful for the subject to have a large circle of accessible professional and personal acquaintances.

However, you do not always have to profile someone because of fame or recent accomplishments. Sometimes, especially for feature treatment, a profile can focus on someone who is not a celebrity or widely known. These people often also make good human-interest stories that are appealing to readers for other reasons. The idea of profiles that focus on everyday people, of course, is to emphasize what makes this individual, who might otherwise be like your readers, unique or successful at what he or she does. Editor Art Spikol (1979) said profiles should be chosen depending on the answers to five questions:

- Is the person everything he or she seems to be?
- How did the person get that way?
- How does the world react to, and perceive, the person?
- How does the person perceive himself or herself?
- What can we learn about the person by analyzing his or her environment – the people, places, and things with which he or she surrounds himself or herself?

After deciding the person is right for your attention and effort, you need several things to fall in place. For starters, to do the profile you need cooperation from the person you will be interviewing. A profile will rarely succeed without the person agreeing to be interviewed. Ideally, the person to be profiled will agree to the idea and allow you to interview him or her one or more times. This is not always an easy matter because the type of person you often profile is usually busy and in demand by many other people at work, home, and the news media. Some people, such as those

who feel they have been treated poorly by writers, may resist you. However, most people are flattered when asked to be profiled and will agree to it.

You need a significant block of time with the person to get to know him or her. If possible, request interviews in several different environments. You need to talk with the person in his or her creative or work environment, but it adds a dimension to talk to the person at his or her home in a more relaxed setting. Being at both the work environment and home environment allows you the chance to see the person in distinctly different (most of the time, at least) environments. If possible, find a "neutral" location as well, such as a park where the person likes to jog or a quiet coffee shop, for uninterrupted conversations. The more variety of places you can use, the more you will learn about the individual.

People who do not want to be profiled or do not have time to talk to you can still be profiled. The job is just harder, requiring you to do more work in your research and in interviewing others who know the person well. Gay Talese's widely read and reprinted profile of movie star and singer Frank Sinatra, which first appeared in *Esquire* in the April 1966 issue, characterized the entertainer without the author directly interviewing him. In 2003, *Esquire* editors pronounced Talese's celebrity profile the best it has ever published.

Talese spent three months carefully and tediously observing Sinatra and talking to Sinatra's friends and acquaintances to gather his information for "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold." He watched Sinatra during the production of an NBC television program and watched him with his friends in a Beverly Hills bar. Talese, working on the story long before the digital tools that we love today were available, wrote down conversations he heard for passages of dialogue. He noted what the singer ate and drank. He watched Sinatra's mood changes. Talese incorporated all this into his profile of a man who was, in Talese's words, "the champ." Here's how his story began, setting a scene and its atmosphere and displaying Sinatra's unusual mood:

> *Frank Sinatra, holding a glass of bourbon in one hand and a cigarette in the other, stood in a dark corner of the bar between two attractive but fading blondes who sat waiting for him to say something. But he said nothing; he had been silent for much of the evening, except now in this private club in Beverly Hills he seemed even more distant, staring out through the smoke and semidarkness into a large room beyond the bar where dozens of young couples sat huddled around small tables or twisted in the center of the floor to the clamorous clang of folk-rock music blaring from the stereo. The two blondes knew, as did Sinatra's four male friends who stood nearby, that it was a bad idea to force conversation upon him when he was in this mood of sullen silence, a mood that had hardly been uncommon during this first week of November, a month before his fiftieth birthday.*
>
> (Talese, 1966, p. 89)

The description of this story is a big part of its success. But Talese also puts things in context for readers.

> *… Sinatra was ill. He was the victim of an ailment so common that most people would consider it trivial. But when it gets to Sinatra it can plunge him into a state of anguish, deep depression, panic, even rage. Frank Sinatra had a cold.*

> *Sinatra with a cold is Picasso without paint, Ferrari without fuel --- only worse. For the common cold robs Sinatra of that uninsurable jewel, his voice, cutting into the core of his confidence, and it affects not only his own psyche but also seems to cause a kind of psychosomatic nasal drip within dozens of people who work for him, drink with him, love him, depend on him for their own welfare and stability. A Sinatra with a cold can, in a small way, send vibrations through the entertainment industry and beyond as surely as a President of the United States, suddenly sick, can shake the national economy.*
>
> (Talese, 1966, p. 90)

Accessing and Observing the Subject

In the previous section, it was suggested that profile writers take the time to watch the subject of the profile do what he or she does best. Why are you writing about this person? Is he or she a top dress designer in a market? Then try to watch this person creating, designing, or at least, introducing his or her work at a show. For short-term fast profiles, it is difficult to do this, but for deeper profiles such as those used in magazines or other nondaily periodicals, it is essential for the success of the feature. If you are profiling a politician, watch the person interacting with constituents, on the floor of the legislature, and in a political party meeting. Each experience tells you more about the person and helps you write a more complete profile of the individual. This requires access and it is vital to writing a good profile. The person must, ultimately, grant access.

"The key in good profile reporting is access. It has always been access, and will always be access," said veteran long-form feature writer Walt Harrington (1997), who spent many years writing profiles of political leaders, religious leaders, entertainers, other prominent people, and what he called "ordinary people" for *The Washington Post*. "You need to be with your subject. You need to immerse yourself with your subject. You need to find time when you can be with your subject while they are doing what they do. This is classic immersion journalism. In profile writing, you need to be able to integrate that into your reporting" (Harrington, 1997).

The idea is to understand the person and not necessarily the image he or she presents, to understand his or her motivations and what drives the individual. Harrington has written 11 books, including profiles about newsmakers such as Jesse Jackson, Rosa Parks, and George H.W. Bush.

"What is the hierarchy of values that makes them the person that they are? The techniques for doing pieces on people like that are not unlike the techniques I would use if I were going to do a profile on a typical 13-year-old boy or a fundamentalist family," Harrington, a professor emeritus at Illinois, said. "I try to think in terms of doing profiles on prominent people the same way I think about doing profiles on an ordinary person. I've always had the catch phrase that 'you find the extraordinary in the ordinary' and when you do prominent and famous people, you are really going out 'to find the ordinary in the extraordinary'," Harrington (1997) stated.

Detailed observations and a thorough understanding of an individual will help you create a better, more complete picture of this person in your mind and, consequently, in the minds of your readers. Note the person's mannerisms. How does the person interact with others? Is his or her work behavior with others different from behavior

with superiors, with family, and with friends? If so, why? It is also beneficial to your profile to explore the meaning of the details you note – if possible. What do the peculiar office decorations that you noticed mean to the person?

Your job as a profile writer is not only to dig out facts and lay them out but also to evoke the world in which that person lives. Help people in some way understand what it is like to be that person. The finest profile writing is sympathetic to the persons being interviewed in the sense that you are trying to make people understand their world as they see it. You are trying to use a lot of techniques to unravel the person's conception of the world (Harrington, 1997). You can approach this in two ways. Depending on the individual and his or her activities, you can observe him or her without his or her knowledge. This must be in public places, of course, when the individual is performing, speaking, working, or out with family. Or like Tom Hallman with Sam, obtain permission to observe. This might be necessary when you watch in a small-group situation for demonstrations or less public forms of work.

Profiles benefit from detail and depth of information. Profiles are about people and what they represent. To accomplish this type of understanding and content, a profile writer must spend time with the person and individuals around the person. For depth profiles, it can require traveling and observing in addition to interviewing. For Ken Auletta (1997), the long-time writer for *Esquire* and *The New Yorker* and author of several books that profile prominent executives such as Harvey Weinstein, gathering information for a profile means extensive field research. He advocated a process he calls "access journalism" – others call it immersion journalism – that involves gaining complete access to his source and source's activities before he begins writing.

For a business executive, for example, this approach includes typical interviews, but also sitting in the office and attending normally private meetings as a "fly on the wall" and observing. In doing this, Auletta (1997) tried to visit the person at home as well as talk to the individual in his or her office. He recently wrote about Rupert Murdoch, Australian and American media tycoon and one of the world's richest individuals.

"In Murdoch's case, I asked to go to his home. I had dinner at his home. I always ask them to let me talk to their spouse. In most cases, they allow it, but in Murdoch's case, he could not deliver his wife – she wouldn't see me. She didn't trust --- I interviewed his kids, his family, friends. I saw how he lived" (Auletta, 1997).

Harrington, a retired professor in addition to his work at *The Post*, offered an observation trick that adds detail to his profiles (what he calls "nonfiction short stories"). He carries and uses a camera and a large amount of audio recording gear. At times, when activities are too fast or hectic to note details he may want to use later, he takes his own photographs as a form of note-taking.

"It helps me evoke scenes and settings. There are times when something is going on too fast and you cannot quite get it. Sometimes in my pieces you might have a description of a look on somebody's face, or the way they are holding their body, or the way that they're pointing to someone's chest while they are talking to them," Harrington wrote (Harrington, 1997). "It is literally the description of a photograph that I have taken that I can build upon. It gives me an image to deal with in my mind. I use a lot of tape. You cannot get detail and precision without a tape recorder. There's too many things going on."

As with other types of feature articles, one source is not enough to give a full picture of what you are writing for your readers. Even if that source is the subject of

the story, you should not stop with just this source. You can be fooled by a good interview or series of interviews with your source into thinking you have everything you need to write; you do not. Good profiles are balanced in their use of sources. You should attempt to give the positive and negative elements of the individual and you usually must go beyond the person for that.

Lou Ann Walker, a fiction and non-fiction writer and creative writing professor at Stony Brook Southampton, has written numerous profiles for magazines such as her profile of Candice Bergen for *New York Woman*. She recommends investing time in knowing the person.

"Become friendly with the people who work with the person you're interviewing," Walker (1992, p. 323) suggested. "Charming a secretary who is snooty can lead to important revelations. One such secretary confided in me that the actress I was interviewing was just breaking up with a man and dating someone new. I would have never have found that out if I hadn't done a little buttering up" (Walker, 1992, p. 323).

So, how many interviews are enough for a profile? You Seldom need to interview as many as 50 people, but you cannot depend on just one either. Some writers do large numbers of interviews, but usually that kind of depth is necessary only for a long-form magazine profile or a book. Generally, you can get a good sense of the person by talking to a half dozen to a dozen well-connected sources. This is no magic range. The real trick is variation in the type of source you use. Too many similar sources will not tell you anything new. You need to find a balance of friendly and unfriendly sources, and family and professional sources.

You want to incorporate as many anecdotes as possible into your article to help generate "insight" into the person's personality. During your interviews, encourage the person and your other sources to tell these stories. These should be informative, amusing, and profound, but also functional. They need to contribute to the story-telling.

There are at least two other types of research to use in a profile beyond interviews. You should also check archives for other stories written about the person. As we discussed in an earlier chapter, many publications have digitized their libraries and now sell access to the public through LexisNexis Academic, NewsBank, and similar online services.

Another form of research to complete in preparing your profile is public records. Many such records are open and searchable on the Web in the U.S. You may find interesting details about a person by reviewing civil and criminal court files, police records, property records, and other public documents. This is especially important for profiles of individuals in public services, such as appointed and elected government officials. It is also an effective strategy to learn more about business executives, entertainers, athletes, and others widely known in your community or region whose activities are in the public record.

Some of the best profiles are built on research through first-hand observation. For profiles of people who lead very public lives, this is not difficult. Go out and watch them do their thing. If you have an assignment to profile an entertainer, go to some of the live performances. If the person is a politician, go to public meetings and events and attend some of his or her presentations. If an election campaign is involved, follow it. If the person is a social leader, try to get access to some of the parties or charitable events this individual supports and attends. Watch them work. These

descriptions of the individual add an entirely different dimension. The information you obtain from an interview or two with the person is critical, no doubt, but observations give you richness in detail that you cannot always find in interviews. You see and, perhaps, hear how the person works. You see the person interact with others in his or her most comfortable places.

Writer and Professor Lou Ann Walker (1992), who has specialized in writing profiles of entertainers and other celebrities, believes this is one of her most useful tactics in creating a profile. "One of the best tactics is to stay with the person all day, particularly on a movie set. Academy Award winning actress Marlee Matlin allowed me to tag along on a free day, and we had a most illuminating time. I let her drive me all over Los Angeles. (Frankly it was a death-defying stunt. She's so excitable that when she uses her hands to sign, she often takes both of them off the steering wheel.) She took me to visit her elderly grandmother in a nursing home and I could see the family affection. We went to a Beverly Hills restaurant where she used her TTY --- to have a conversation with her boyfriend, an actor on location in Canada. It was these small moments that made our interview memorable," she stated (Walker, 1992, p. 323).

These moments can also be obtained second-hand, of course, by interviewing others. There is no real substitute for the real thing and being there yourself. It is more authentic and accurate. Of course, this creates access issues. To be able to spend time with a busy actress such as Matlin requires arrangements well in advance. Access to celebrities, major business executives, political leaders, and other busy individuals in the news and public spotlight, is not often easy to arrange. If access is granted, the additional depth to the story is superior to most other observations. Some restrictions may be part of the arrangement, but this will not prevent you from spending time watching the individual. For some persons, this will not occur often. Reclusive individuals are most difficult. But for some profile subjects, public appearances are part of their lives and therefore easier in your effort to observe them and to profile them.

Using the Q & A Format for Profiles

Some publications prefer to publish profiles in a question and answer (Q & A) format. *Interview* and *GQ* magazines, for example, will use the Q & A approach for regularly published features. *Interview*, founded by artists Andy Warhol and John Wilcock in 1969 to focus on the lives of celebrities, presents Q & A with a twist, often assigning one celebrity to interview another. The interview is recorded, edited, and published, and the result is often a very conversational profile. For example, a recent interview profile of *The Daily Beast* editor-at-large Molly Jong-Fast was conducted by *Interview's* editor-in-chief Mel Ottenberg (Ottenberg, 2022).

> *We're only halfway through 2022 and the United States has already seen nearly 300 mass shootings, the reversal of fundamental reproductive rights, and an unprecedented gridlock at almost all levels of the government. To cut through the bullshit,* Interview's *editor-in-chief Mel Ottenberg sat down with Molly Jong-Fast, the culture writer and host of The Daily Beast podcast The New Abnormal, for a deep dive into American politics.*

MEL OTTENBERG: *Hi Molly! I'm glad to talk to you.*
MOLLY JONG-FAST: *Hi!*
OTTENBERG: *So, Molly Jong-Fast is –*
JONG-FAST: *I'm a contributing writer at* The Atlantic. *I write a newsletter called* Wait, What? *which you can subscribe to quite easily. I have a podcast called* The New Abnormal, *which is from* The Daily Beast. *And I'm a writer who writes about politics.*
OTTENBERG: *I don't subscribe to this newsletter.*
JONG-FAST: *Oh, you should.*
OTTENBERG: *I discovered* The New Abnormal *in 2020 and what I really liked about it is: A, you have a really iconic voice and B, you don't even ever try to disguise your disgust for this hell storm of America. I'm like, what the fuck, Molly? Look at these motherfuckers. The idea of taking rights away from women for non-humans that don't exist–I still can't fucking believe it. I don't understand why it's so* Handmaid's Tale? *Why are they going so hard and is it a good idea on their part?* (Ottenberg, 2022, n.p.)

While these pieces can be quite interesting and engaging reading with their conversational approach, interview stories and profiles are often similar but can be quite different. Industry and trade publications also use the Q & A format for profiles of prominent individuals, often because of its efficiency in presenting information and its simplicity in organization. These can easily be edited for length. Some magazines, newspapers, online news sites, and newsletters will use Q & A for a feature or department in each issue. These regular Q & A often are simply an interview article but can also be the basis for a Q & A profile or personality sketch. Both are quite popular with magazines, newsletters, and online news media, although the approaches are also found from time to time in daily and weekly newspapers.

When published in print or online form, the length varies from a few questions and short answers to lengthy presentations that cover thousands of words. Typically, Q&A interview articles and profiles have a narrative introduction and then begin the edited questions and answers. These articles are always edited for clarity in some manner, including both questions and answers. Question content as well as the exact words of the subject of the story are presented as they were recorded during the interview, but some questions and answers may be edited out for length or other editorial reasons.

As you may have noticed from the *Interview* example, the Q & A form has certain advantages. One is brevity. A second is the sense of realism, the sense of listening to the conversation that readers often feel. It can be like they were a fly on the wall during the interview. A key to success, however, is the organization of questions and other information prior to the interview. These interviews do not have to be verbatim, of course, because it would then be a transcription. You must edit and select material to be used as much as you would in the more traditional story form. Because there is a strict Q & A format, the introduction and ordering of questions and answers must be as logical as any other sort of writing. Some publications have used an editor's note

instead of a narrative introduction to begin. You can write it, of course, for the editor, but this brief introduction needs to explain the context of the Q & A.

This format also has its share of disadvantages. One is a lack of writing, and even editing, creativity. There is often a need for precision in question-asking and in presenting responses. There is temptation to leave in extraneous material, also, to keep the Q&A more realistic. But this is a reason to edit carefully and thoughtfully. Make certain the answers stick to the questions and do not drift.

Issues Involving Celebrities

Many profiles, human interests, and other types of features are focused on well-known people. Celebrities require special consideration because there are numerous barriers to gaining access to celebrities. They cherish privacy. These individuals often require security and personal assistants and are regularly in demand by writers for stories of all types. These barriers include secretaries and receptionists for business executives; bodyguards, publicists, personal assistants, and press agents for entertainers; and public information officers and media relations liaisons for individuals in high levels of public service. Their jobs include being a formidable barrier and "protecting" their employers from people.

South Florida writer Lesley Abravanel faces these challenges daily. The veteran reporter, who covered celebrities and personalities for the *Miami Herald*, cautions young journalists who seek to mix with these types of sources in search of a good feature or news story: "Like Paris Hilton's fame, celebrity journalism is somewhat of an enigma for many reasons. Remember, we are the ones making these people famous, so in a way, it's up to us – not the celebrity publicists (a concept that is a beast in its own right) – as to what and whom we choose to cover. Look beyond the obvious and try to hone in on something that's not been reported," Abravanel suggested.

"We all know that Britney Spears is a train wreck, but if you have the opportunity to interview her or to interview her allegedly close friends and family, make like an investigator and dig beneath what may seem to be and what may very well be a very shallow surface. When I started writing 'gossip,' the title itself was the *Scarlet Letter* of journalism. People didn't even, and still don't, consider gossip to be journalism. Oh, how wrong they are! It is the quintessence of journalism in that I start with a lead or 20 and then chase them down to find the real dirt. It requires constant fact-checking, sourcing and, at times, legal intervention to make sure items reported aren't slanderous or libelous."

"That said, oftentimes a celebrity publicist will be the leaker and will undoubtedly be spinning a story that will make their client smell like roses. Do not always trust the flaks. You need to go beyond the spin and spin your own web of investigation and, the ultimate reward in celebrity journalism, breaking news. It's no walk in the park and, when you're out at 3 in the morning, exhausted and wanting to go to bed instead of waiting for Brangelina to show up somewhere so you could possibly ask them a question, it may seem fruitless. But there's nothing more satisfying than breaking a story. And don't think any question, when it comes to celebrities, are dumb ones. You never know what the answers will be, so when in doubt, just ask. Have no fear because remember: these people are just like you and me – although when it comes to

some of them – you will definitely scratch your head wondering how the heck they became famous in the first place. Be careful. It may be your fault!"

Abravanel reluctantly arrived in Miami in 1990, to go to college "when my parents insisted I go to the University of Miami because it would improve my social skills. I was a nerd in my suburban Long Island high school with dreams of becoming a club kid a la the Macaulay Culkin movie 'Party Monster'," she explained.

Abravanel is grateful for what happened in Miami. The choice that her parents made determined her future. She never left South Florida.

"Thank goodness they dropped me off in Miami. After studying journalism and cultivating the most excellent social skills, I moved to the burgeoning area of South Beach where the likes of Madonna and Sly Stallone were partying. I worked as assistant editor of a classical music magazine during the day and, at night, I was doing the Slaves of New York/Bright Lights Big City house scene while writing my own weekly gossip column for the now-closed *Miami Sun Post* called 'Nocturnal Admissions'," Abravanel recalled.

Then she began to find other feature writing opportunities and her career expanded into other subjects and styles of writing.

"*Porthole Cruise Magazine*, a consumer cruise ship magazine out of Fort Lauderdale, lured me into the travel writing biz by making me managing editor. I cruised the world for three years and then decided to disembark on a career of freelance," she stated. "At that time, Frommer's called, asked me to write its *South Florida* guidebook and the rest, as they say, is history – during which time I've authored *Frommer's Florida*, *Frommer's South Florida*, *Florida for Dummies*, and *Time Out Miami*."

When Abravanel was not writing about travel, she wrote three columns about celebrity gossip, nightlife, and a gossip blog each week for the *Miami Herald*. After leaving the newspaper, she has continued to freelance for the *Herald* and *Miami New Times*.

"Miami is, after all, a celebrity playground, not to mention a treasure trove of colorful, wacky and, at times depraved, characters and, if it weren't for them, I probably wouldn't be here right now," she noted (Personal communication to author, September 6, 2008).

Entertainment Weekly senior writer Jennifer Armstrong (2007) says her most important asset in writing about celebrities, in profiles or other story forms, is her sources. And they are not, she says, the celebrities. "The most important people for me – and for my fellow staffers and editors – are publicists. They control the access we need. They make our lives so easy that sometimes we want to hug them and weep with joy, and so difficult other times that we fantasize about committing graphic violence we never knew we had in us," Armstrong, who specializes in television for *EW*, stated (Armstrong, 2007, pp. 41–42).

Experienced writers such as Abravanel and Armstrong know there is a strategy to get to your source for the interviews you need. Your first step is to fully identify yourself and directly ask the celebrity's publicists and assistants for their help, explaining what work you are doing, what you need from them, and why. Because your work is legitimate and serious, you might get to the person to request the interview. You might also be asked to wait while your request is taken to the person for a response. If you work for a known publication or Web site, your publication's

reputation can be an asset even if you are not known to them. Do not be afraid to use it to help you.

If you are still denied access, then try to work your way around the barriers. One way is to find the person as he or she leaves the workplace, or where the person shops on weekends, or at some other public location where you can introduce yourself and make your pitch. This direct approach often works, although it requires extra effort. There are occasions when a writer, stopped by a person's staff, gets an interview because he or she went to the extra effort to ask directly. It is possible that the person never received the original request submitted to an intermediary.

Some creative reporters and writers may use a different approach. They will send a letter to tough-to-reach subjects at their homes. This is a way to access busy people, well-known business executives, celebrities, politicians, athletes, and others who have tremendous demands on their time. While it is not ideal, you can also use published or broadcast quotations from other news sources that you locate in your research. Of course, this means you must attribute the information to its original source in your article and many editors don't like that. They want original content. If it comes to that, you can take these from speeches, press conferences, and similar public events with proper attribution. And don't try to make it look like it is original. It does not harm your article to tell readers that you made attempts to reach the person but were refused for whatever reasons.

Writer Lesley Abravanel on Celebrities

Leslie Abravanel, South Florida freelance writer

I write three weekly columns for the *Miami Herald* – Scene in the Tropics, on Tuesdays and Saturdays, is celebrity and gossip-focused, and Velvet Underground, on Fridays, concentrates on nightlife and entertainment. Deadlines are pretty rigid, as it's a daily newspaper. For Scene, it's Mondays and Fridays, and for Velvet, we have a bigger lead time because it's a feature in the Weekend section, and the ultimate deadline is Wednesday, although I lie to everyone and tell them it's Monday. In my opinion, there's nothing worse than people sending you information at the last minute.

My duties in fulfilling these columns include, first and foremost, gathering information, a process that is ongoing, 24/7. Then I will check to make sure all information is legit, correct, and kosher – sometimes, especially when covering a fickle business such as nightlife, things change after the deadline. Although it irks me to no end, there's nothing you can do except make a correction immediately and move on. In the decade-plus I've been writing these columns, I have built up the most invaluable, priceless network of sources – everyone from hotel concierges, housekeeping staff, and bartenders, to the skycaps at the airport. Everyone is a source and never discount anyone if you're looking to build a reliable network.

The fun part of my job is actually going out into the so-called field – the clubs, restaurants, parties and yes, when it comes to gossip, even the most random crevices you can imagine, from gas stations to drug stores. But going out, contrary to popular belief, is work. It's not fun sitting around waiting for

things to happen and for people to show up, and, in this business of celebrity journalism, we're always waiting for someone or something. It's thankless that way. You are like a doctor on call. I remember being sick with a brutal cold and home in bed when I got a tip that George Clooney was en route to a bar and he was with a possible love interest. In this business, you can't afford to ignore calls like that, especially if they come from one of your proven, in-network reliable sources. So, I sucked down several Espressos to knock out the Nyquil stupor (or, rather, exacerbate it), threw clothes on, and ran out. I got Clooney and even got to ask him a question about who his "special friend" was. Score! But it sucked to have to leave the comfort of my bed to do so.

In addition to writing weekly for the *Miami Herald*, I also freelance for many other publications. Among them, of course, the supermarket tabloids. Why do I do it? The money rocks and it's thrilling to dig even deeper than perhaps the *Herald* will allow. The *Herald* is much more stringent when it comes to celebrity reporting. As Miami's only daily newspaper, they can't afford to take chances when it comes to allegations. Things in my *Herald* column MUST be proven and true. When it comes to the tabloids, although all of my reporting for them is also sourced, fact-checked, and legally checked, there's much more leeway. For instance, I broke the story of Britney Spears doing cocaine off a toilet seat at a South Beach night club for *Star Magazine*. Before that story made the cover, we had to subject three of my sources to a polygraph test administered by an outside private detective. When all three sources passed multiple tests, we went with the story, and it made the news worldwide. Sadly, Britney got dumped from endorsing Pepsi, but we were hardly crying for her. Anyway, she clearly preferred Coke.

Oftentimes, tabloids call me and ask me to check out a tip they received in my area. While it may not lead to a story or a byline, chasing tips for tabloids not only pays pretty well but also brushes up on your journalistic skills, too. It's great practice.

To counter what some may call the tawdry world of celebrity journalism, I also author the *Frommer's Florida*, *South Florida,* and *Florida for Dummies* guidebooks, covering the entire state of Florida in 800-plus pages. I do that once a year. I am also the editor and contributing author of a similar, hip Miami guidebook based in London called *Time Out Miami*. Traveling through the state for these projects also affords me an amazing opportunity to add to my gossip network. I always, to use a hackneyed phrase, kill many birds with one stone when out in the field because you never know who you may meet and when you may need them for a story.

Writing guidebooks has also given me a reputation as somewhat of a Florida expert, so because of that, I have been quoted in *The New York Times*, have written for Discovery Channel, Business Travel magazine, and many others, all about some aspect of Florida. Again, it all helps me in my networking. When first starting out, no job is beneath you. A small story in a small publication is not only a clip and experience for you but it may be seen by someone else who may need you to cover something similar for them. Don't turn anything down, but make sure you always have a contract before taking on any assignment.

And remember, you have to start somewhere. After graduating from the University of Miami, I got my first job as assistant editor at a now-defunct classical music magazine. I didn't know Pavarotti from Prince. It didn't matter. I learned. While doing that full-time job, on the side, I approached a small, local newspaper and offered to write a gossip/nightlife column for them --- for exposure and experience. I was paid $25 a week. It was that column, "Nocturnal Admissions," which led me to the *Herald*. So, you never know!

And even though we're journalists, do not be afraid to be creative. That's what makes your writing stand out from the others and leads to assignments. I like to think my writing is snarky and entertaining. Creativity also helps when you are on deadline and need to fill several more column inches (Personal communication to author, September 6, 2008).

Tips for Writing Profiles

David McDaniel, executive vice president at Direct Success, Inc., and former business editor of the *Asbury Park Press* in New Jersey offered a wide range of helpful profile suggestions based on his experience as a daily newspaper editor:

- One of the best ways for writers to portray the character is with anecdotes. Get these from the subject and from people who know the person such as business associates, family, and friends. One good anecdote, like a good photo, could be worth a thousand words. "What was your most frustrating experience? Why did you decide to go into business/politics?" These questions might get you a good anecdote.
- Profile pieces should use some description of physical characteristics such as mannerisms, appearance, and dress, all of which can be woven into a story or dropped in with a paragraph. Don't be afraid to make obvious characterizations. Is the subject rugged-looking (large build, beard, ruddy complexion)? Is he or she well dressed and attractive (well-groomed, neatly pressed suit, starched white shirt, neatly combed hair)?
- Find out as much about the person's business or job as you can. For a business executive, for example, what are the company's assets, annual sales, main products? How many employees, and at how many locations? What is unique about the business?
- Include all the usual biographical material – age, family, education, service, and so on. Much can be tacked on at the end, but it is better to weave this into your story.
- Be sure to include the subject's tastes and habits. Does he or she chain-smoke? Like classical music? Have an unusual hobby?
- Find out what the person's goals are. Is he or she satisfied with the present situation? Where does this person want to be in ten years – expanding the present business or sitting on someone else's board of directors?
- Ask what influences made the subject a success today. Parents? Spouse? Teacher? Tragedy?

- Try to find out the person's shortcomings. Use them, if necessary, to give the entire picture.
- Get three times as many quotes as you need. Get them from the subject, spouse, friends, competitors, and suppliers. Good quotes tell the story best.
- Ask the subject to give advice to others aspiring to the same career and to make predictions about the future of the industry.
- In preparation, research the subject by seeking library clips, other articles, or advertisements by the person's company. Be prepared with good, thought-provoking questions, and try to put your subject at ease.
- Form your lead after the interview but keep your eyes and ears open for the "peg" as you gather material (McDaniel, 1986, p. 4).

You may have restrictions other than time. You might be asked to conduct your interview with another writer in a small group setting. Your source may limit the scope and topics that will be discussed (e.g., nothing personal). You may have a language barrier and need translation, so you really interview the translator. You may be told that you must conduct the interview with this busy celebrity in an unusual environment – in a car, backstage, in an automobile while the celebrity drives you around, or even at home with the kids screaming and dogs barking.

Prepare your major questions in advance and write them down. You might wind up not needing them, but these serve as a crutch when awkward slow moments occur. And record your interview for accuracy. For very important interviews, use two audio recorders to guard against failures. This also lets you participate more in the conversation because you do not have to spend so much effort taking detailed notes. Work to keep control of the interview. This means you should control the direction of the conversation. That is harder to do than it might seem. Sources sometimes like to provide an answer that has nothing to do with the question. Change topics if you must do so when a pause or interruption occurs.

The Need for Profile Focus

You now know that a good profile has focus. When you are beginning to work on a profile, you need to think about what the focus will be. Most people that are worthy of profiles have multiple elements of their personalities and accomplishments that force you to choose a particular direction for the profile. When you are restricted on length, particularly for traditional newspaper, newsletter, and online profiles of 750 to 1,500 words, you cannot afford to drift aimlessly in your description of the individual. You can probably get deeper into an individual if the luxury of a long-form assignment comes your way. This would permit you the chance to probe in several directions. But most profiles do not permit such depth and require more writing discipline through limited focus.

Some profile writers call this type of focus a "theme" for the article. Whatever it is called, the point is the same – give your article some direction. The direction might become apparent in your research before you begin interviewing or writing. Even if it is not after you have completed most of your research, you can still look for the focus during your interviews with the person and others.

Writing Personality Sketches

A personality sketch is not as in-depth as a profile must be. Although some personality sketches are as lengthy as some profiles, sketches generally are short and to the point. The personality sketch is designed to give us a quick look at an individual and to tell us why the person is important. These articles usually lack the depth of profiles and must not waste words with the reader.

Stanford Professor Emeritus William Rivers said a personality sketch is a tough assignment, forcing you to "become a keen observer and recorder of significant details" (Rivers, 1992, p. 254). These articles, Rivers noted, contain imagery created by details that you find in profiles. However, there is just not as much in these shorter pieces. You must show; do not tell. You must do this in your own sketches. Rivers also suggested that sketches be strengthened by the use of anecdotes. These have tremendous value to you as a writer and offer much strength to your sketch. "Anecdotes, by their nature, are not great world-shaping events. They are human looks at something. They have small cores, but radiate ramifications" (p. 260).

Common Sources for Profiles

People
Person being profiled
Family
Neighbors
Social media
Workplace associates, rivals, and competitors
Businesses where person shops
Observations
Person at work
Person at home with family, friends
Person enjoying personal activities
Personal Web sites
Library research
Resumes, press kits
Publicists for individuals and their organizations
Public records
Creative works by the person
Archived newspaper, magazine articles
Video

Writing Capsule and Thumbnail Profiles

Capsule profiles, often called thumbnail profiles, are growing in popularity with feature editors. These profiles are quite short, just a few hundred words, and usually follow a standard format developed by the editor of the publication or news service. These

formats may even vary within the publication, with different sections or departments offering their own brief profiles depending on the nature of the subject being profiled.

There is also a trend toward writing these short profiles about nonhuman subjects such as institutions, corporations, sports teams, network programs, films, and similar subjects. They can be major parts of listings, for example. These items follow a certain content outline, usually set by the publication based on categories of information. A new company, a successful business, or a new investment category might be profiled by a business magazine, specialized company or industry newsletter, business news Web site, or business section of a daily newspaper. At the beginning of a new sports season, standardized profiles of teams or leagues might be part of a special section or part of the regular coverage of a top game of the day or week. In the news section during election campaign periods, personality sketches or capsule profiles of all serious candidates are standard fare. In entertainment, profiles of new movies, books, records, and other art forms are commonplace.

Each of these serves a purpose. The capsulized profile is an information digest for quick reading. These capsule profiles can be placed within larger articles on broader subjects as a sidebar or placed beside articles of equal importance. Some publications ask people to profile themselves by answering a short standard list of questions. This form is an abstracted version of what you might write in a full profile but without elaboration. These short profiles are just bare bones. There are no wasted words. They are direct to the point.

Avoiding Profile Problems

Can you make mistakes when writing profiles? Yes. You can permit yourself to be overly positive, overwhelmed by the "star" power of the person you are profiling. Or you may be intimidated. These are some of the pitfalls of beginners, especially students. And you can talk too much during an interview, for example. Some interviewers get involved in the interview to the level of talking too much, interrupting responses, and ultimately getting less from the source as a result. Or you can waste valuable time with terrible questions. To avoid mistakes, exert self-control and discipline. Be careful not to depend on only the person you are interviewing.

Perhaps worst of all, you can be "steered" by the person to a certain agenda and focus of the person's choosing. That could be good for the story, but it may be bad, too. One way to avoid some of these problems is to use numerous sources representing a variety of perspectives. Do your homework, of course. Research for background provides a strong foundation for the story and your interviews. As for writing the story, there are some tips for that part of the profile assignment also:

- Do not write in chronological order only. It may be tempting for a beginner.
- Select a strong focus for your article.
- Do not forget your nut graf.
- Do not drift around.
- Do not jumble facts.
- Use good transitions to connect the pieces.

Chapter 11

Writing Social Trend Features

Feature writers and their editors seem to love trend stories. And readers are drawn to them as well. Trend features tell our readers about new national and regional patterns and habits. They can be based on anecdotal evidence, such as a handful of examples, based on something found in social media feeds, or they can be more sophisticated and based on massive data analysis. The stories tell us about people, objects, and groups that are influencing and impacting a community or larger society. Each year, we hear about dozens of trends and new things through these stories. Think about fashion trends. Or think about food. Or lifestyles. Or vacation destinations. Or even digital electronics.

This type of feature story has become much easier with digitalization of just about everything in our lives. Consider the information collected when we are shopping and buying things in stores, when we browse online, when we see a doctor or nurse, when we are at work, when we go to school, when we commit a traffic offense or are a crime victim, when we are dining in a restaurant, when we rent or buy a place to live. Everything we do leaves some sort of digital footprint. Yes, some is private, but much is public. We can, as feature writers, identify trends from watching people, observing, reading, studying social media statistics, consuming other news media, or, simply, by just paying closer attention to what is going on around us.

During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, we first learned about people both working and attending school at home. Parents were even homeschooling their children. The word zoom became Zoom and took on a completely new meaning. Then we heard about people moving from where they worked to smaller communities with better real estate value, scenery, less intensity, and healthy family life. We learned about vast amounts of social isolation and loneliness occurring from quarantining. We even heard about relationships changing. Some began. Some failed. Travel was curtailed and we essentially stopped moving around our neighborhoods and towns. We learned about the subtle differences in protective masks and in types of hand sanitizers and air filtration.

Suddenly, home delivery of everything boomed. Groceries. Prepared foods. You name it, it was delivered. We heard about city centers with no workforce and numerous lunch spots and afterwork bars (meaning happy hour bars) being forced to close. And buildings losing commercial tenants who no longer needed expensive office or retail space. We heard about numerous healthcare and public health trends, too, such as those who did not want to be vaccinated or those who believed various false stories about the public vaccination programs.

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And then we heard about a year or so after the pandemic began, as vaccines became available and we learned to manage the pandemic better, how individuals were leaving their jobs because they wanted to continue to work at home, that their employers wanted them back in the office or on the factory floor. And, it continued. We also learned about trends involving people who did return to work. They started their own businesses. Those who did return to office work worried about many things, such as what to wear or how to interact with colleagues, or what to do with the pet they adopted while working at home that is suddenly all alone for large blocks of time.

These were all social trends feeding off the same original event, the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Smart writers saw these things happening, read studies, analyzed government statistics and data, and found the stories. Usually, these stories represented some significant shift in behavior of people or groups.

Constantin Gillies was one of the writers who noticed the changes. He writes for the Management section of Swiss newspaper, *Handelszeitung*, a German-language Swiss weekly in Zurich. Gillies, a freelance writer based in Cologne, Germany, specializes in technology and has also worked for *Die Welt*, *ComputerWoche*, *Impulse*, and *VerkehrsRundschau*. He developed a recent story about office workers during the pandemic, determining that those returning to the office are trending toward the young and male in Switzerland and Germany. People, he observed, do not want to return to the office after being allowed to work at home (or anywhere else) during the peak periods of the pandemic, adding that this could lead to a two-tier society in the future. The beginning passages of his story, automatically translated from German into English for LexisNexis Academic:

> *In the future, anyone entering an office will see mostly young faces. In the elevator, at the desks, in the cafeteria – people everywhere who are at the beginning of their professional lives. Most of them are men. Women, on the other hand, appear much less frequently in the office world – and older people not at all.*
>
> *Hung Lee, a well-known British human resources expert, warns against this scenario. "Hybrid working is leading to a separation of genders and generations," says the CEO of recruitment platform Workshape. Lee fears that women and older people will permanently retreat to the home office and leave the present world to young men. In the HR scene, his theses certainly meet with approval. But is hybrid working really bringing back the old male economy? And how can home workers avoid being left behind?*
>
> *It seems certain that more people will work from home in the future.*
>
> (Gillies, 2022)

Defining Social Trends

Like the office worker story, there are labor trends, market trends, advertising trends, housing trends, real estate trends, health trends, and population trends. We see all kinds of social and other trends. These phenomena have been around for a long time, too. We began thinking about social trends when it became common to collect observable social data and graph it to see what it tells us. Something going up,

something going down. Something flat. These days we can all do it ourselves using Excel or Numbers, but it began more than a century ago with historians using non-statistical approaches, then spread to other sciences at the end of the Great Depression, the late 1930s. Sociologists and economists began to look at business cycles, such as employment and product sales as well as other early statistics, in a systematic manner to better understand social change. In Great Britain in the 1960s, Social Trends referred to a leading national social and economic research project that at one time helped measure national behavior. This sort of information collection occurs around the world, helping government officials, analysts, scholars, managers, and others understand attitudes, education, crime, public health, and much more.

The focus on trends continues at an even greater level today, and the collection of information and its distribution is often automated and faster than ever imagined a century ago. It is extensive on both public and private levels. The availability of these numbers along with our abilities to observe and notice things as journalists have led to a fast-growing category for features that focus on the latest social and other trends in our communities and around the world.

Trends are tendencies in some aspect of our culture. They can represent movements by groups of people, known as a social movement. They can reflect technology, work, education, fashion styles, culture, and personal appearance preferences such as clothing or make-up. Usually, trends are evolutionary and take some time to develop and be detected. Major population shifts, for example, from urban to suburban or rural areas, can take considerable time to reveal themselves. But today, we have numerous indicators of such things that can be used as foundations for stories. We not only use U.S. Census data, but we can use different levels of housing statistics, education and school numbers, and labor reports.

So, let's write features about them.

Identifying Trends for Feature Stories

Sometimes social trends features can emerge simply from our casual observations. This is anecdotal evidence. The use of social media is an easy place to start for students and young writers. Just look at the follower counts on a social media platform and try to figure out why that person or subject or video is so popular or interesting to so many. It is an easy way to get started.

"It's easy to dismiss Twitter as jabber, but smart marketers will recognize it as a stream of free consumer data to be mined in near-real time. Online visualization tools can help pinpoint what consumers are reading and sharing, elucidate memes in the chatter, and unearth trends," observed Scott Berinato, an editor for the *Harvard Business Review* (Berinato, 2010, p. 34). He added that anyone researching a market, such as a writer searching for new trends, can learn about business competitors, look for unexpected themes, can dig deeper, look for experiences of others, learn about negative sentiments, and learn about terms and language that seems to be dominating a given conversation.

Check for annual or regular federal and state reports about public matters such as crime, health, education, religion, employment, the environment, and housing. These are topics that interest just about everyone. We all hope to be safe and healthy, have some connection to education, are involved or know people who are active in a local

church, worry about keeping or finding a job, are concerned about the environment, and are always alert to changes in local housing matters.

It should be easy if you know where to look. Start with figuring out who collects, analyzes, and releases these statistics. As noted in Chapter 4 about research, the federal government is a favorite source for this sort of information, especially at the national level. For crime, check with the FBI, the Drug Enforcement Agency, and the Department of Education. For health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Department of Health and Human Services. For education, the Department of Education. For religion, the U.S. Census. For employment, the Department of Labor. For the environment, the Environmental Protection Agency and Department of the Interior. For housing, the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Census. There are numerous others at the national level and, if you look at your own state's departments and agencies focused on these topics, you will find even more places with potential trend stories with more local focus. The same, of course, goes for county and city governments as well.

An example is the monthly news release by the U.S. Department of Labor about employment, commonly known as the monthly jobs report (see https://www.dol.gov/newsroom/releases for further examples). Because of the pandemic, increasing inflation, supply chain issues, and a changing economy, interest in labor trends has grown in recent years. A national employment report such as this one generates significant news coverage each month and can lead to state, regional, and local social trend features for your market, especially if there are major changes. How do people in your community feel about finding jobs? How do things in your community compare to those on the state (if you can find out) and those released by the federal government? What do local labor experts, such as union leaders and human resources managers, think? There are many similar questions and experiences of local people that you can use to build a story.

We can also use national and regional polls and surveys released to the public to identify social trends in attitudes and certain behaviors. Numerous polling organizations release their findings to the news media. These news media releases and poll results, or the original news stories about the results, can be used to build local trend features. For example, in mid-2022, the Gallup global analytics and consulting people released a new set of national survey results focusing on Americans' confidence in major U.S. institutions over a two-year period (Jones, 2022). These numbers showed a general decline in the proportion of people holding a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in all major U.S. institutions. The overall average was a new low, Gallup experts said. These institutions included, from highest to lowest levels of public confidence, small businesses, military, police, medical, religion, education, labor, banks, tech, presidency, courts, newspapers and television, big business, and Congress. An observant feature writer could turn this into a trending feature about how local residents feel about their government institutions today.

Wall Street Journal reporter Lindsay Ellis based a workplace trend feature on a poll from Gallup in 2022. Ellis' story focused on the decline of friend relationships at work that she discovered in a national study conducted using 4,000 hybrid workers across the United States. Her story told *Journal* readers about the reduction in socializing and bonding by company employees, such as at after-hours happy hours. She began her story with an anecdotal lead, focusing on one solid example of the

trend, then discussed the poll findings, and proceeded to offer more examples and interpretations of what is happening at work:

> *In the months before he left his last job in 2020, Michael Trotter came to dread an end-of-day question from colleagues: Do you want to grab a drink?*
>
> *"I don't want to put in eight, nine, 10 hours and go out and have a beer — and talk about work for another four hours," says Mr. Trotter, a 53-year-old database administrator in Cupertino, Calif.*
>
> *Many workers say that forging office friendships has become harder and less of a priority over the past two years, during which millions of working Americans changed jobs or worked from home.*
>
> *After more than two pandemic years, some professionals are also "quiet quitting" and making other moves to carve out more work-life balance … .*
>
> (Ellis, 2022)

The declining changes in views could easily be localized to a state or metropolitan area for a feature story to supplement the news of the day. To do so, a writer could interview local political scientists and sociologists, for the expert perspective and to further understand what this decline means, interview people who work within the institutions represented on the list, and have discussions with adults, who are similar to the survey respondents who have been losing confidence in them. A careful writer may detect both similarities and differences locally when compared to the national trend. It would be an interesting and timely feature built on the study's trend statistics.

Looking Closer at Statistics and Trends

Emma Goldberg is a writer who covers working and the future of work for *The New York Times*. As the pandemic was winding its way through 2020 and 2021, numerous changes occurred in the workplace. People began working at home. Some returned to the office in 2021 and some did not. By 2022, Goldberg found U.S. Department of Labor statistics that hinted at another trend that could lead to a story. People were voluntarily leaving their jobs. They were quitting. Millions of Americans, it seems, decided to quit working in the fall of 2021. She had her story. Here's how she began it:

> *Something infectious is spreading through the work force. Its symptoms present in a spate of two-week notices. Its transmission is visible in real time. And few bosses seem to know how to inoculate their staff against this quitagion.*
>
> *It catches quickly. "There's a shock when you see multiple people leaving — it's like, oh, is there something I'm not seeing?" said Tiff Cheng, 27, who left her job in digital marketing in July, along with five of her close friends at the 40-person agency. "Is it my time to leave as well?"*

> *Quitting rates were high in August, September and October. Then, according to Labor Department data, they climbed even further: More than 4.5 million people left their jobs voluntarily in November, a record high in two decades of tracking … .*
>
> (Goldberg, 2022)

Trends can be about purchasing or shopping, fashion, music, social media content and users, recreation, eating, faith, tech toys, streaming, language and word meanings, travel, art, and all sorts of cultural things. Need more examples? Have you read something about something trendy lately? Consider these recent national trends:

- Working and school from home
- Vaccination or no vaccination?
- Dining "in" with take out
- Recreational vehicles and staycation summer family vacations
- Watching new-release movies at home
- Having food (both groceries and from restaurants) delivered
- Shopping for clothing and home supplies online

What others can you think of? And just for college and university campus news, higher education trends:

- Fewer people attending for first time or returning to campuses
- Student and faculty/staff health and wellbeing
- Career pathways
- Creative ways for financial aid
- Flexible learning
- Modern features for housing

A good trend story (meaning you will likely get it published) identifies and tells readers about something new that is just emerging. Hopefully, it is something no one else has so far. In other words, get it first in your market. So, timing is important for these stories.

Start with a source for finding the trend numbers. This is what Grist environmental justice fellow Julia Kane did for her story telling readers about the growing trend toward buying or leasing electric vehicles among Americans. Grist, an independent and non-profit media organization (https://grist.org/), focused on telling environment and climate solutions, sought to inform its readers about the increasing interest in EVs. Kane based her story on a set of data provided by and analyzed by *Consumer Reports*. Her story emphasized the results of CR's national survey of adults.

> *More Americans than ever are interested in buying or leasing an electric vehicle, according to data released by Consumer Reports yesterday.*
>
> *In a nationwide survey, 14 percent of respondents said they would "definitely" buy or lease an EV if they were in the market for a new car today — a significant jump from just four percent in 2020. Twenty-two percent said they would "seriously consider" an electric vehicle … .*
>
> (Kane, 2022)

While this story continues to offer further details about the growth in interest in electric vehicles, this can easily be adapted to a local news outlet. The story would include interviews and perspectives of EV dealers, area environmental experts from area colleges and universities, government environment policymakers and scientists, someone from the local electricity and power provider, and both owners and potential owners of EVs. Another approach might focus on one family that recently purchased an EV and the changed family members have noticed in their lives such as spending on gasoline, electricity spending, range of the vehicle and recharging, and other aspects of ownership.

Most of us will recognize that EVs are trending up now among consumers. Experts expect EVs to grow among both small and large truck owners as well. This story, geared to passenger EVs, has a strong foundation in the Consumer Reports survey results and the primary national analysis by Grist that show something is happening. It just needs localizing for a specific market.

Unfortunately, some social trends that we learn about or identify ourselves with are just too new to have any hard evidence about them. These stories, if approached and developed, rely largely on anecdotal evidence and the experiences of sources we find. For example, teenagers were banned from some movie theaters in the United Kingdom in 2022 after movie-goers complained and sought refunds because of disruptions. The trend was noted by anecdotes gathered by reporters of *The Telegraph* in London.

> *Cinemas have banned teenagers wearing suits from watching the new Minions movie over rowdy behaviour inspired by a social media trend.*
>
> *Hordes of young people have filmed themselves on TikTok disrupting screenings of Minions: The Rise of Gru by cheering, clapping and shouting during the film.*
>
> *The behaviour has caused disgruntled … .*
>
> (The Telegraph staff, 2022)

The story might lead to others if the trend continued to grow, bringing follow-up features. Given that it is powered by the social media platform TikTok, there was potential to spread quickly from the UK theaters to cinemas in other parts of Europe and still other parts of the world.

Useful Trend Data Sources

U.S. Census (population and numerous other changes)
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (public health)
U.S. Department of Labor (employment-unemployment)
FBI Uniform Crime Report (major national crime categories)
U.S. Department of Education (schools and campus crime)
Economy and the federal Consumer Price Index
State and national tourism offices (travel data)
Restaurant associations (local dining data)

Writing Features about Trends

Writing a trend feature story requires several forms of reporting before any writing occurs.

First, these stories tend to be specialized subjects, so research and absorb as much as you can about employment, fashion, music, or whatever topic is involved. A 2022 *Women's Wear Daily* story focused on a classic knee-high and even higher boots fashion trend for 2022. For working on this story, a feature writer would need to check online fashion sites and talk to local retail store buyers to start.

Second, make sure the possible trend is really a valid trend. While we will discuss that further a few paragraphs below, it is important to note here that some might not be what they appear. There are numerous false starts in trying to identify trends and be at the cutting edge of writing about it. This, too, requires talking to experts about it and, as stated several times, seeking out any statistics to establish or debunk the trend.

Third, if you don't have supporting statistics, find them. To do this, check public databases, social media, and public records. Ask experts. Talk to government officials at agencies that may track what you are seeking.

Fourth, search for trends reports from recent government studies. These reports are almost always public records and must be available on request. Most are posted online with cover news releases with contact information for public information officers (government public relations people) who offer further help. Population, crime, employment, and housing trends are common trend features built on government reports.

Fifth, don't forget your readers and whether this possible story might meet their interests. Choose what you and your editors know will appeal to community (or broader markets for online news sites) readers. Concern for personal health, nutrition, and fitness is one such category that has been popular with many readers worldwide.

Yuen Sin, a correspondent for *The Straits Times* in Singapore, recently used a government housing study to build a Singapore housing trend news story. Citing the HDB, or Housing Development Board – a statutory board under the Ministry of National Development responsible for Singapore's public housing – she wrote about survey data about housing preferences among public housing residents. Her story could become the basis for a strong feature about people living in public housing.

> *SINGAPORE – Singapore residents who live in smaller Housing Board flats are more likely to have aspirations for better housing, as compared to those who live in five-room or executive flats.*
>
> *Such aspirations to have a bigger flat, to live in private property, or to live in a purchased flat instead of a rental flat, are also the most prevalent among younger HDB residents, with more than seven in 10 of those aged below 35 wanting to do so … .*
>
> (Sin, 2021)

However, the story only lays out the survey results as a news story should do. A feature approach that would go well beyond this approach. For example, a story could be built upon young families living in public apartments that are too small and

who aspire for better, as discussed in Sin's story. Talking to parents with young children, talking to those who wish to have larger families, interviewing members of growing multigenerational families, and talking to newlyweds wishing to begin families would give the perspectives of those who live in HDB spaces.

Sasha Gonzales writes feature stories for the *South China Morning Post* in Hong Kong. She writes about health and beauty, but also food, design, architecture, and travel. Her work has appeared in several publications in Asia, including *Wine & Dine*, *The Peak*, and *Her World Singapore,* and has been writing regularly for the *South China Morning Post* since 2011. Her recent story about diet trends getting attention on social media such as Instagram and TikTok and that they may be risky for those who try them. She does not rely on public data or an opinion poll, instead she depends on health and nutrition expertise. She notes that many people look to social media for health and wellness suggestions, but many of these diets popularized on social media are not nutritionally sound and may be harmful according to the experts she interviewed:

> *Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are full of content promoting diet trends, and it's easy to find posts that promise to help you lose weight and get healthier.*
>
> *But there's a negative side to this phenomenon, with content creators – who aren't always qualified to give health advice – touting calorie-restrictive diets and "miracle" products like detox teas and supplements. Besides promoting unrealistic body ideals, such content is associated with other problems, such as nutritional deficiencies and mental health issues.*
>
> (Gonzales, 2022)

Another approach to trend storytelling is to debunk a trend. Sure, we do that, too. Show readers it is not really happening. For a feature writer, this is the type of story we can have fun with and do something out of the ordinary. Explain and do it in an amusing way. For example, maybe it isn't really getting hotter this summer in your metropolitan area even though many people think so. Start by checking the National Weather Service records at the local airport. Talk to meteorologists. Visit the atmospheric science experts at a nearby college or university. If you do determine that the average highs and lows this summer are the same as in previous years, you have your story. Then you seek an explanation from the experts. Maybe they tell you that it is the humidity that has increased some and it "feels" hotter even though statistically it is not. After learning all of this, take your findings to the street, the beach, a public swimming pool, or an air-conditioned shopping mall and talk to people about what they think. It should result in an informative and entertaining feature story.

And we can show how trends are developing or even reversing. This happens too. During the pandemic, people stopped going to school and going to workplaces. After a year or two, this began to reverse itself somewhat. And it became a story in many markets around the world. Finally, we should explain in these features how trends have originated and how they run contrary to public opinion.

Social Trend Features Require People

It is one thing to write a story that generalizes about changing behavior with numbers and statistics, percentages, and other quantitative trends. This is where we start. The part that makes the story interesting and a strong news feature is translating those numbers into people and examples of the trend behavior. Our challenge as feature writers is to identify a trend and then find numerous (and hopefully diverse) groups of people who represent it.

An easy place to identify trends for stories is Google Trends (the U.S. version is at https://trends.google.com/trends/?geo=US but users can easily switch countries; also take a look at https://blog.google/products/search/best-trends-forever-15-years-google-trends/). Pinterest Trends (https://trends.pinterest.com) and Facebook's Today's Trends, an entertainment Web site, (https://www.facebook.com/WhatTrendedToday/) are also helpful for finding stories. And the consumer trend research Web site, Trend Hunter (https://www.trendhunter.com) offers some free access to information about current trends on its Web site.

Regardless of where the ideas originate, trend features require people. The examples so far in this chapter illustrate that. The human element. The story must offer numerous people in a diverse manner who serve as examples or in some way illustrate the trend. For example, don't forget children and teenagers. These days, they notice things adults don't always see that might become a strong social trend feature.

Wall Street Journal personal finance writer J.J. McCorvey told the trend story about how Nashville residents have been overwhelmed by inflation and increasing housing, childcare, and utility prices. McCorvey, who specializes in credit, loans, and wealth-building strategies, also contributes to the publication's Young Money column. His story about hardships in Nashville focused on the individuals most impacted by an inflationary economy in the most critical sectors of housing, childcare that allows parents to work, and utilities like electricity, natural gas, and water, and how it is changing their lives. It is a heartbreaking and tragic feature story. What types of people does he include? Not residents who are inflation-proof. He looks at those who often must live paycheck to paycheck and who often don't have enough money for food or to pay a monthly bill. Among those whose story he tells are a Waffle House cook, a patient scheduler at Nashville General Hospital, a minister at an interfaith community center, a hot chicken restaurant owner, a young CBD store manager who wants to buy a home, and a would-be singer-songwriter. He also interprets the different quality-of-life statistics through leaders and experts including the Nashville mayor, a local economics professor, a local historian, and reports from a state university economics and business research center.

> *NASHVILLE – Few Americans are getting squeezed by inflation in more different ways than the residents of Tennessee's capital.*
>
> *Housing prices in Nashville have more than doubled over the past 10 years, partly because of a population boom that has brought nearly 400,000 new residents to the metropolitan area. That has pushed some locals farther away from the city center, adding hours to their weekly commutes. Meager public-transit options mean soaring fuel prices are hitting them especially hard.*

> *To make matters worse, the price of utilities has exceeded the national average every year since 2009. And the surging population has pushed up the price of daycare, too.*
>
> *Many Nashville residents said in interviews that they are cutting back their spending or taking on more work. Nearly all of them are re-evaluating their budgets to determine what is a necessity and what isn't. Some have had enough and are leaving town.*
>
> *"I love that Nashville is growing, but so many people are coming here to the point that I can't afford to put my kids in daycare," said Tianna Martin, a 23-year-old mother of two … .*
>
> (McCorvey, 2022)

What McCorvey does is a very important feature writing technique. He shows readers the trend through examples and through people; he does not just tell us through narrative, to make this trend interesting and real for readers. We cannot just rely on numbers to establish the social or economic trend. We cannot take a boring approach to a boring topic. By interviewing people impacted by the trend, either positively or negatively, we illustrate the trend on the ground level. It is easy to say there is high inflation, but find people impacted by it, like McCorvey did, and you have a strong social trend feature.

Building a Trend Story

McCorvey's story is a strong example of how to work these stories from scratch. You identify a database, a government report, survey results, or find a story that has already done this and became breaking news. Stories like these are like Yuen Sin's public housing story (Sin, 2021) for *The Straits Times* in Singapore that could lead to a feature about public housing residents seeking larger and better places for their families to live. These stories are built on newly reported statistics such as housing, employment, retail sales, public health, and education. They should lead to feature stories about the people impacted by the changes identified in the data and report.

As feature writers, it is our duty to go beyond the statistics. We must find those people who represent the changes within these numbers. Then you add real people to the trend generalizations and narrative. This will be the hard part for many beginning writers, going beyond the reports, and even the experts, to find those truly impacted. But it is worthwhile when the story is finished.

In late 2021, CNN business published a story about record household debt levels held by Americans. The news story was based on information in a quarterly report by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. Americans, the story said, had seen U.S. household debt climb to more than $15 trillion, an increase of almost 2% in just three months. Most feature writers seeing this story will sense a deeper and more meaningful human story. This CNN story (CNN, 2021) strongly suggests further work and a feature story about how debt is impacting families, prospects of retirement, the elderly on fixed incomes, the poor, and everyone else. A feature writer will tell their compelling stories. We talk to these people and then do even more. We talk to a money expert to help interpret the statistics and talk about the impact on people in

the community. Since this involves loans and debts, talk to local credit card company public relations people. And interview one or two mortgage and/or car loan bankers. The key step for this feature is to find people who have increasing debt such as individuals and families. This includes young families, students, and people who have recently bought homes or cars.

Case studies are an effective way to tell stories such as one about increasing debt. It would require finding one or two families willing to be open about their financial situation. This won't be easy since most people are quite private about such things. This sort of feature would describe the income of the wage-earners and the family's debts, including housing (rents and mortgages), credit cards, cars, insurance, medical and medicines, groceries, utilities, daycare, and other routine and monthly expenses.

More than one family might be another good approach. The story could highlight the situations of a middle-income family, a low-income family, and a fixed-income family. It would look at increasing costs for mortgages and rents, gasoline, and groceries, and how wages have not kept up with the rising costs.

The Peninsula newspaper, one of the leading English dailies in Qatar, was launched in 1996. Its coverage goes well beyond its national borders. A recent staff-written feature story, with no byline offered, highlighted a social trend in India, that of women pushing the movement toward acquiring and using electric vehicles. The story is heavily dependent on examples. It begins with the story of a 35-year-old mother of two who builds EV components and illustrates the movement to cleaner energy and EVs. She works in a job that makes parts in Pune, near Mumbai in western India.

> *PUNE /HOSUR – Pratibha Kumbhar, a 35-year-old mother of two, is making up for lost time.*
>
> *Trained in soldering, she aspired to a career in electrical work but hemmed saris for her husband's tailor shop in the west Indian city of Pune until two years ago, when she found work in the country's fast-expanding electric vehicle (EV) sector.*
>
> *Kumbhar's ambition, stalled by motherhood and safety worries about working in a roadside electrical shop, has now taken wings as she assembles circuits for EV speedometers at a factory in Pune – her first job as a formal worker with fixed wages.*
>
> *She is one of a small but growing group of women blazing a trail amid India's EV boom, driven by record sales and a policy push, as the government seeks to cut planet-heating emissions by promoting the use of electric scooters, rickshaws and cars run on power that is set to become increasingly clean over time.*
>
> *Despite concerns over safety and quality, as well as a shortage of charging stations, demand for EVs is outstripping supply – and as firms ramp up production, they are offering rare jobs to women in an auto industry that has been male-dominated.*
>
> *"I work fixed hours and I am financially independent," said Kumbhar, assembling circuits with pink-gloved fingers on an all-female shop-floor at Kinetic Communications, a manufacturer of EV components and a subsidiary of Indian auto-maker Kinetic Group.*

> *"My soldering is good and I may get a promotion. This was my dream," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.*
>
> *The factory's workforce is about four-fifths women, which goes against the grain in India, where only 20% of women are in the labour force … .*
>
> (The Peninsula, 2022)

Finally, one additional example. It has been popular in recent years, but it has been done for much longer. Parents have found value in teaching their children at home, commonly called homeschooling. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and a base of dissatisfaction with the quality of online teaching, some work-at-home and stay-at-home parents decided to try homeschooling. *The Daily Universe*, an educational laboratory student newspaper at Utah's Brigham Young University, looked at homeschooling to attempt to answer the question of whether it is a social stumbling block or a strategy for academic success. Undergraduate senior and staff writer Natalie Baugh wrote an informative 1,400-word story focusing on local teens and their parents involved in homeschooling, adding homeschool school district data from the Utah Department of Education to build her story. The feature was illustrated with an infographic and numerous photographs.

> *Zach's eyes open as he notices snow falling outside his window. He glances at the clock on his bed-stand; it is 7:30 a.m. on a school day.*
>
> *Unlike the other kids in his neighborhood, Zach does not have to worry about racing through the snow to the bus stop early in the morning. He knows school with mom will begin later in the morning. He drifts back to sleep.*
>
> *Homeschooling for Utah students like Zach in has almost doubled in the past few years, according to the Utah Board of Education. In the 2015–2016 school year, there were more than 16,000 students enrolled in homeschool. Davis School District had the highest amount of students with 4,761, followed by the Alpine, Nebo and Jordan school districts.*
>
> *According to Mark Peterson, the public relations director for the Utah State Board of Education, there are no homeschooling statistics past the year 2016 … .*
>
> (Baugh, 2020)

Chapter 12

Seasonal Features

The Washington Post writer Fritz Hahn has covered bars, drinks, and nightlife for the Weekend section for two decades, but he also writes about a variety of local entertainment topics. He took on the end of summer recently for his readers. This story highlighted the new activities fall brings to residents of the District, Virginia, and Maryland. He reminded readers of the pumpkin harvest and pumpkin shooting, cider sipping, street and beer and wine festivals, arts events, family events, and farm tours, to mention only a few things listed in his story. The feature began with a brief introduction to set the context and included fall activities by category:

> *After a sweltering summer that felt as if it would never end, fall finally seems in reach. And fall is the season for festivals: being outside on an afternoon that is not too warm, not too cold, and perfect for picking pumpkins with the kids or sharing a bottle of wine with friends.*
>
> *With summer vacations fading into the distance and the holidays on the horizon, the Washington area's weekends are filled with festivals that invite us to explore the region's seasonal bounty, and to spend time with loved ones. In the coming weeks, these are the events that should be on your calendar.*
>
> *Harvest*
>
> *Fall Pumpkin Harvest Festival at Great Country Farms, through Oct. 31*
>
> *The Fall Pumpkin Harvest Festival is a wonderland for children. Take a hayride around the farm. Pet and feed adorable baby goats and extraordinarily fat pigs. Race down huge slides. Dig in a corn crib. Bound around on pumpkin-shaped jumping pillows and run through mazes. Climb wooden structures shaped like castles and pumpkins, or a mountain of tractor tires. Meet a pumpkin-smashing animatronic "P-Rex." It's acre after acre of gleeful, barely constrained chaos.*
>
> *But parents and childless adults who venture out to Bluemont, at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains, will also find ways to enjoy themselves … .*
>
> (Hahn, 2019)

Hahn's story is built with separate sections highlighting different types of fall activities, but he first establishes how the fall season is different and welcomed by Washington-area residents.

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Similarly, Brian Sargent and Shelia Stogsdill, staff writers for the Oklahoma City *Oklahoman*, wrote a similar beginning-of-season feature for spring by emphasizing, of course, the long-awaited change in weather:

> *While several areas of The Sooner State were worried about flooding, others worried about wildfires.*
>
> *In other words, it was a typical first day of spring for Oklahoma.*
>
> *Rivers continued to crest Thursday from torrential rainfall earlier in the week, but unseasonably warm temperatures on first day of spring, combined with gusty southerly and southwesterly winds, also created very high to extreme wildfire conditions, especially across parts of western Oklahoma.*
>
> *Eastern Oklahoma hit hard*
>
> *The rain-swollen Illinois River crested at 22.29 feet Thursday morning, more than 11 feet above flood stage, the National Weather Service said.*
>
> *A day earlier, the river crested at 24.73 feet at Watts and has since dropped more than 13 feet.*
>
> *The recent rains were the third worst on record with record flooding occurring at Watts on July 25, 1960, at 26 feet and on May 10, 1960, at Tahlequah at 27.9 feet … .*
>
> (Sargent & Stogsdill, 2008, p. 13 A)

And the city desk staff of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* handled the beginning of spring in this creative way:

> *Do you feel it in the air? Today is the first day of spring.*
>
> *The vernal equinox occurred at 1:48 this morning. And while the weather may not cooperate (remember, seasons are astronomical events, not weather events; the weather lags behind by a couple weeks), the season of rebirth is officially here.*
>
> *Here are a couple of light-hearted suggestions to mark the secular aspects of Easter Sunday, the greatest of Christian holy days.*
>
> *An Easter egg hunt with more than 3,000 hidden eggs will take place at 10 a.m. Saturday at Dormont Park, Pool and Recreation Center, 1801 Dormont Ave., for children up to age 10. The line will be cut off at 11:30 a.m. Visit and have a photo ($3) taken with the Easter Bunny … .*
>
> (Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, 2008, p. S-1)

When we think of seasons, such as the change from one to the next, perhaps we often think of weather, or sports, maybe food, perhaps special clothing, special holidays, vacations, or family gatherings. There are many types of seasons and people connect many different memories, activities, and traditions with them. We often associate vacation camp with summer, for example. In the winter and spring of each year,

typically, many daily newspapers and certain family-oriented magazines devote attention to summer camps. As part of this annual activity, parents and children spend countless winter and spring hours talking about camps and deciding what they will do that upcoming summer. Will they attend the same camp as last year, or something new, or will there be a new specialty or theme for this year's camp?

As a seasonal feature doubling in a service role, these stories help such discussions with new information and descriptions. Journalists often write feature stories about the seasons and seasonal activities such as summer camp. Seasonal articles celebrate the regularity of life – the cycles and rhythms of nature and human life that govern our lives. Traditional seasonal stories, such as one about Christmas or Easter, call your readers' attention to the beginnings and ends of important segments of their lives – such as the shift from winter to spring and summer – to special dates and events that demand our recognition and memory.

Seasons, as a force of nature, transcend all human life. They are global. The seasons dictate the parameters of human life: seasons affect plant life, animal life, our climate, the Earth's natural and seemingly unnatural events, migration, hibernation, and the Earth itself. British author Anthony Smith said quite succinctly that "the complex rhythm of our planet Earth, rotating upon its axis in its orbit around the sun, encircled all the while by its neighbour the moon, provides the basis for the ceaseless rhythm of life itself." (Smith, 1970, p. 16)

Modern writers have provided seasonal stories for their readers to help them prepare for changing natural seasons, for the end-of-year religious holidays such as Christmas and Chanukah, for the beginning of summer vacations, for the start of a new school year, for graduation, for racial and ethnic celebrations, for national and regional birthdays and anniversaries, for special days for mothers and fathers, and even for the loves of our lives. Few publications overlook marking these events in some fashion each year. For some publications, entire sections or issues may be built on a season or holiday. For others, a brief article may be sufficient. But for most, something in between is preferred.

Ileana Oroza, a former assistant managing editor for news for the *Miami Herald* who recently retired as a journalism senior lecturer at the University of Miami, feels seasonal features are expected and almost mandatory content for newspapers and other news media throughout the year. And often, though, some writers try to avoid the assignments.

"Reporters sometimes groan at the thought of having to produce another article on safety tips for Halloween or a package on the perfect Valentine's Day chocolate," stated Oroza, who worked with feature content at the *Herald* for more than two decades.

"The fact is, people expect those seasonal stories – though, clearly, they don't want the *same old story*. It's the reporter's task to surprise them – to find a new angle, an unexpected local twist – and to tell the story with imagination and grace. To do that, the reporter has to get excited about the story and get in the mood of the season. A reporter with the attitude of a Scrooge is going to produce a bah-humbug story," Oroza explained. "As assistant managing editor, I had to look for feature stories to run on 1 A. I was always a big proponent of running good features on the front page." (Personal communication to author, September 29, 2008)

Unusual perspectives are often what it takes to bring a reader's attention to a routine seasonal event. A typical fall season story might focus on the change in weather such as the coming rainy season, household chores such as winterizing cars and homes, or special holidays such as Halloween or Thanksgiving. Since many of us associate seasons with food and drink, it is generally easy to connect the two and create a successful feature story idea.

For example, for a recent St. Patrick's Day, *San Francisco Chronicle* staff writer Jesse Hamlin prepared a page one feature about a very traditional and very beloved local Irish "dump of a bar" (Hamlin, 2008, p. A1) that is patronized by numerous residents of the city. His 1,900-word piece profiled the Dovre Club, its late Irishman founder, and its 40-year history. This is how Hamlin's introduced his story:

> *Johnny Marley, a San Francisco electrician from County Louth, Ireland, was sitting at the bar of the Dovre Club on Valencia Street one recent Friday night, sipping a pint of Guinness next to a bloke who owner Elvis McElhatton calls the bar's token Englishman.*
>
> *"The feeling in here is very, very homey," said Marley, who's been hanging out at the warm little corner bar for nearly a decade. "It's not like the other bars that are all Irish. The great thing about the Dovre Club is that it's an Irish bar and an American bar. You have all kinds of people here."*
>
> *The Dovre Club has been a raffish San Francisco melting pot since 1966, when the late publican Paddy Nolan opened his beloved dump of a bar on 18th Street in a former Norwegian social hall. It became home to politicians and neighborhood pensioners, janitors, mechanics, rogue writers like Warren Hinckle, old Irish guys and young Latinos, the porn-purveying Mitchell brothers and gay and lesbian patrons who'd drop in for a drink after a meeting upstairs in the Women's Building.*
>
> *When Nolan died in 1996, the Dovre passed to his prize bartender, fellow Dubliner Brian McElhatton, who vowed to keep the founder's generous and irreverent spirit alive. He did that until he died in January of brain cancer at age 38. Now his brother and his widow, Meghan, are carrying on the Dovre tradition.*
>
> *"This is not just another bar. There's a real community here," said Elvis McElhatton, 40, a curly-haired man whose given name is Brendan. He was dubbed Elvis by his buddies in Dublin because of his sideburns, not his singing ability.*
>
> *"I know three-quarters of the people here very well. A good chunk of our regulars were regulars at the old Dovre. The people look out for each other here. Whenever anyone's ill, or something's up, everyone's always quick to put their hands in their pockets and have a whip-round," he added, using an Irish phrase for passing the hat.*
>
> (Hamlin, 2008, p. A1)

For a recent Christmas season story for *OK! Magazine*, writer Karen Berg, aided in her reporting by a nutritionist, prepared a holiday feature listing ten foods to avoid

during the month-long holiday. With a short introduction, she lists the foods by name and then provided a sentence or two explanation for readers that tells why each item is not healthy eating— such as high-calorie content in a slice of pie or high-fat content in a glass of eggnog. She began the piece this way:

> *Holiday parties and family dinners can lead to tasty temptations. Before you know it, you've filled up on countless empty calories and loads of saturated fat. Sure it tastes good at the time, but is it worth it? Nutritionist Keri Glassman tells* OK! *what you can expect from some of your favorite holiday dishes. After all, who wants to ring in the new year 10 pounds heavier?*
>
> (Berg, 2008, p. 75)

Feature stories such as the food and drink features by Hamlin and Berg illustrate how easy it is to take a normal home activity such as cooking or a fun treat such as state fair junk food and apply it to the unique situation of the fall season. These articles, one quite lengthy and the other rather brief and breezy, are typical of seasonal features that are necessary throughout the year and appear in just about every part of every type of general publication, and there are ample opportunities to write them.

"Seasonal articles are not particularly hard to write—in fact, I think they are easier than general articles," said veteran seasonal article writer Clinton Parker. "They do require a certain depth of research, however, and absolute historical accuracy. That's why it is best to specialize in a particular event or field. Once you have done the basic reading for the specialty, the articles are much easier to write" (Parker, 1975, p. 44).

Whether you specialize in seasonal articles or not, you will find that much of your feature story writing is influenced by the calendar. Newspapers, magazines, online news sites, and newsletters run features to highlight special events each year. Readers expect it. Seasonal features are not much different from the other types of features. In fact, you will probably mix some of the different elements and types of feature stories when writing a seasonal article. There may be humorous seasonal stories, or highly personalized stories, or stories with great human-interest elements, seasonal and holiday travel stories, or a review of traditional holiday season music, food, or dance.

Reflecting an Appropriate Tone

One significant point is that seasonal features should reflect the tone and the theme of the season. Local customs and traditions largely dictate this. A seasonal feature can be ruined with the wrong approach. It would, obviously, be in poor taste to write an irreverent feature about the military for Memorial Day or Veteran's Day. Then again, a writer who does not try to be especially creative, light, and tricky on April Fool's Day or Halloween is completely missing the point of those special days.

It is not unusual for newspapers to run several seasonal stories at the beginning and during a major holiday period. Labor Day is an example. Each fall, newspapers, online news sites, and magazines advance the special weekend and national holiday as well as cover the special events scheduled honoring those who work hard for a living. Although it is more common to publish a major story or feature package of several articles, some newspapers produce entire special sections in recognition of local festivals or holiday periods. Similarly, it is not unusual to find a monthly specialized magazine devoting a

cover and most of its top stories in an issue to a seasonal theme. Food and entertainment magazines often prepare "special holiday issues" featuring new recipes, party and gift ideas, holiday getaways, and, of course, their versions of the ultimate feast.

Author Daniel Williamson (1975) said a seasonal feature is "an account of an annual event or an aspect of that annual event which captures its spirit" (p. 170). Think about all the New Year's, Thanksgiving, and other holiday stories you have ever seen; dozens, no doubt. To make the special season come to life, you must capture the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and even feel of the season. These stories lean heavily on your descriptive abilities when you write about events and activities surrounding these special moments in our lives.

Why Write Seasonal Feature Stories?

There are numerous reasons for writing seasonal features. First, there's professional opportunity. Although editors generally have enough content for the routine issues of their newspapers, magazines, online news sites, and newsletters, there always seems to be a shortage of good seasonal material. This means seasonal features are an effective way to break into the freelance market and to get an editor to notice your work. Even experienced writers often overlook seasonal story opportunities. These articles, geared to a special time of the year, can also open the door to you and for other, non-seasonal opportunities, writer Clinton Parker (1975) explained. Seasonal features often can focus on the normal and, sometimes, the obvious. Readers are always interested in the most important elements of a season. This is often reassuring and helps present the atmosphere of a holiday season.

Karen Sloan, a member of the Reuters legal coverage team, has also worked as a legal education editor and senior writer at Law.com. Previously, Sloan worked as a city hall reporter at *Omaha World-Herald* and as a reporter at *The Brunswick News* in Georgia. Sloan, a graduate of Columbia University and the University of Miami journalism programs, wrote about Christmas season lights in a holiday feature for *The Brunswick News* that was published on Christmas Eve. She told readers about a growing tradition of extensive light displays and decorations in a small mobile home community.

> I wasn't quite sure what to expect when my editor told me to go up to the small, rural town of Townsend to write about the Christmas displays. I had heard about the lights in passing, but I wasn't really prepared for what I saw when I arrived there,
>
> The small trailer park community had put a rural, Georgia twist on traditional holiday light displays and I wanted to capture the quirkiness in my story. It ran on Christmas Eve, so I just wanted to make it a fun little read about this working-class community that takes holiday decorations very seriously. I didn't want to get overly descriptive, because I felt the photos would tell most of the story. I just wanted to let the homeowners tell the story in their own words as much as possible. And, of course, I couldn't resist a few holiday puns. You really only get to use those once a year, so I decided to take full advantage.
>
> (Personal communication to author, January 18, 2003).

Sloan's front-page story for the southeast Georgia daily newspaper took on a holiday flavor.

I'm dreaming of a … bright Christmas? Bing Crosby might disagree, but the residents of Townsend will take an impressively illuminated Christmas any day over a white one. With a significant number of families in the small McIntosh County community adorning their homes and yards with extensive light displays and decorations, Townsend is the Christmas must-see of coastal Georgia.

In fact, the light displays on private homes are so popular that lines of cars develop as drivers move slowly along streets illuminated only by the glow of such figures as red-outlined Santa Claus shapes and star-bright white deer figures.

While the history of how Townsend became such a hotbed of Christmas light activity is a bit foggy, resident Brenda Ryals said that homeowners really started investing time and money in their displays in the late 1980s.

"It has gotten bigger and bigger every year since then, and now it's so big I can hardly handle it," said Ryals, with a good natured laugh.

Along with her neighbors on Old Townsend Road, many of whom are family, all of whom are good friends, Ryals has filled her yard with not only lights, but sleighs, reindeer, manger scenes, angels, candy canes, presents and almost every other Christmas image imaginable. In addition to the more traditional images, Townsend residents have infused a little south Georgia humor into their displays.

Santa Claus stands atop John and Angie Ryals' home with his pants on fire, while Leroy the Redneck Reindeer has proven to be popular with visitors. Preparation for the holiday displays begins in July, when Brenda Ryals starts making wooden cutouts in her workshop. Homeowners pitch in to help paint the figures.

November is crunch time in Townsend, since residents like to have the bulk of their displays completed by Thanksgiving and lighted until New Year's. "We try to meet a Thanksgiving night deadline," said Brenda Ryals. "The closer it gets to Thanksgiving, the tempers get shorter and shorter."

Rainy weather delayed some displays this year, but homeowners persevered and got most of the decorations up in time for Thanksgiving.

The work does not end once the lights have been put up, the reindeer have been assembled and the manger set out, however. Maintenance is an ongoing issue for Townsend decorators.

No one knows this better than Gloria and Jerry Braxton, whose yard, just several miles down Highway 57 from Old Townsend Road, is packed with a multitude of different light displays, from Jesus on a cross to Santa in a helicopter.

"It's a constant battle to keep all the lights on," said Jerry Braxton. "We've been doing this for about five years now, and my wife really loves it. She stays out late into the night fixing bulbs and making sure everything works right."

Pesky squirrels, Jerry Braxton said, have been nibbling at insulation on wires of some of his light displays.

There are so many different light displays in his yard that Braxton has lost track of the number. In addition to religious and holiday images, the Braxtons have a lighted carousel, horse-drawn carriage, the American flag, a train and several palm trees.

This holiday display is no small production. The Braxtons order decorative frames from a supplier in Tennessee, then make an annual trip north to pick them up. They attach strings of lights to the frames, leaving them with a panorama of lighted images throughout their yard.

Gloria Braxton even had a frame custom-made to read "Welcome to Townsend." All of this Christmas cheer does not come cheap, however. In addition to the cost of the lights and frames, the electric bill for December will come in at about $500, said Jerry Braxton.

Despite the hours of preparation and the costs involved, the Christmas light displays are something that Townsend residents look forward to all year.

"It is a blessing to those of us who live here," said Cheryl Moore. "It's really like a big family, and everybody tries to help each other out."

Not only do the displays bring the community together, but they give Townsend a chance to show off its holiday spirit to outsiders.

According to Brenda Ryals, not only do cars come through for passengers to gawk at the illuminations, but buses, motorcycle clubs and Corvette clubs have made the pilgrimage to see the holiday lights of Townsend.

"It's really worth it when you get done with everything, and you see the cars stopped out in front of the house," said Brenda Ryals. "You see the little faces hanging out the car windows. It's nice to hear the comments and the laughs."

(Sloan, 2002, p. 1)

(Reprinted with permission of *The Brunswick News*.)

The importance of seasonal features extends beyond the need to entertain readers by describing the occurrence of holidays, special attractions, annual events, major anniversaries, or even the changing natural weather and growing seasons. Wire service and newspaper articles focusing on weather often look at the seasonal nature of weather. Some features highlight it. In the Northeast and Midwest, the cooling fall means the season to go into the countryside to see nature's colors. In the South, along the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Coast, late summer and early fall is the rainy season or, as some call it, the hurricane season.

Seasonal feature stories are also used by readers in advance of seasons or holidays to help plan for celebrations, festivals, changing weather, and any special activities. There is a certain functional value to seasonal stories that extends past their pure entertainment value. A well-written seasonal story educates readers about a religious holiday or about a national hero. Or a regional tradition. It teaches our children the value of remembering an important family day such as Mother's Day or even a

routine civic activity such as voting. These stories help readers prepare for potential weather disasters such as winter blizzards, spring tornadoes, flooding, or subtropical hurricanes. The stories can teach your readers how to make, prepare for, and understand the meaning of a special meal such as a Passover Seder.

Developing Seasonal Story Ideas

To begin generating seasonal story ideas, just look at any calendar. For starters, there is a list of major annual holidays and seasons offered later in this chapter. But you can go well beyond this list because these are only the major U.S. national dates. The list will be different in other parts of the world. There are, of course, various other national holidays (such as those in Mexico) that are celebrated in the United States. There are also unique regional holidays and state holidays that are peculiar to the regions and states. You can probably think of one or two in your own state that are not on the list.

Many of the local holidays and seasons do not appear on nationally sold calendars, online calendars, and appointment books, so do not depend on these sources for complete lists. Instead, check with local libraries, school systems (for their own calendars), local newspaper archives, and even local museums, ethnic groups, and civic-business groups. This will help you, especially if you are a newcomer to an area or, for example, you want to write for a publication in another region that you might not live in or be familiar with its customs and history.

However, a serious feature writer – regardless of whether he or she is working for a Web site, newspaper, magazine, or is freelancing – must be organized about writing seasonal articles. There are many ways to keep up, but the most obvious method is to keep your own digital calendar for the current year, but also for the next two years. For example, you can set up multiple layers of calendar events in any of the different versions of Microsoft Office's Outlook. Other software, such as Apple's Calendar or Google's Web-based Calendar, will have similar features. This helps you work in the present and look ahead. You might be working a day or two or a week or two in advance on seasonal articles for a daily newspaper or news Web site, or several months ahead for monthly or quarterly magazines, and you need to be tuned in to needs far ahead, not today.

Another good place to check for seasonal ideas is a print or online almanac (e.g., *The World Almanac and Book of Facts*). Search almanacs on Google and you'll find dozens of them. Some are general in content (e.g., *The Old Farmer's Almanac* at https://www.almanac.com) and others are highly specialized (e.g., gardening, sports, travel). Most general reference sources such as online encyclopedias like Wikipedia (https://www.wikipedia.org) are good for fast research and almanacs are quite thorough in listing public and religious dates of significance throughout the year. This sort of content is easily found on the Web. These books are annually updated, Web sites are updated on an on-going basis, and they often provide special events date listings for many years beyond the current year.

Still another good category is published theme appointment books. These come ready-made for persons who wish to specialize in certain subjects such as sculpture or personal computers. They are easy to find on sale in most bookstores. Inside these books, in addition to the regular listings, are special dates such as anniversaries

unique to that theme or subject. These once print-only books are now finding their way into the smartphone and portable computer apps also.

The key to getting the right idea at the right time for a seasonal story is anticipating, being able to successfully anticipate what is going to be on your readers' minds when the season nears. You must be thinking about what people will want to know about a holiday or special event long before that event is on the general public's mind. You are trying to anticipate interests and even trends: What activities will be interesting? What foods will be tasty? What are the most important local traditions? What ceremonies are essential? You must be able to think about seasons that have not yet arrived. Also, you must be able to find a fresh approach to a story that has been told dozens of times before.

Successful seasonal feature ideas must be timely. You cannot write stories about Thanksgiving meals that require a week's preparation if they are written or published two days before Thanksgiving. Nor can you jump the gun too much because even good ideas are forgotten if they come along too far ahead of the big day. A strong idea draws readers into your story by making them think to themselves as they read: "Yes! This would be fun. I want to find out more."

Good seasonal features also have strong visual potential. Try to select topics that lend themselves to strong original photographs, illustrations, videos, or other visual forms to help tell the story. Suggest to your editors that they use visuals with your story, especially in online form. Suggest specific visual content ideas to them, also. They will likely ask for them. How about proposing a schematic diagram that shows how to make an object, or show how something happens, or perhaps include a boxed set of instructions that include a recipe? Packaging is important with seasonal features and, if you want maximum attention given to your story, plan to propose strong visuals in addition to your well-written and reported story.

Writer Clinton Parker recommended developing a specialization as a seasonal feature writer, such as becoming an expert on Thanksgiving. He has been a pastor in Plymouth, MA, so he focused on the Pilgrims and Thanksgiving. "Much of the trick to selling seasonal material is to stick to a certain holiday or event, mining it for neglected angles," he stated (Parker, 1975, p. 30). For feature writers, this means you should simply think about the regional activities that are occurring, and perhaps one or more of these will develop into a specialization for you. He suggested looking not only at a regional calendar but thinking about annual local festivals and fairs for your prospects.

Writing in Advance of Seasons

There is no doubt that much of the seasonal feature story writing is produced in advance. This is particularly true for monthly and less frequently published magazines, but it is also true for online news sites and daily newspapers. The major difference is that the lead time varies. For a daily newspaper and an online news Web site, the work on a seasonal piece would be not much different from the deadlines you face for a weekly newspaper to monthly magazine or newsletter. Newspaper features editors like to work as much ahead as possible while keeping their story packages as timely as can be done. This assists in the production of graphics such as large original color illustrations, posed photographs for illustrations, and so on. Even for the spot

seasonal feature, done a day ahead, the advantage goes to the writer who finishes early in the day to permit time for revision and collection of any new information as the deadline nears.

For a magazine or newsletter published monthly or even less often, you must be particularly conscious of lead time in preparing stories with content sensitive to seasonal changes. Some monthly magazine and newsletter editors work four to six months ahead of the current date. So, if you are reading this in December or January, you should be thinking about graduation stories, beginning of summer vacation, Mother's Day, Father's Day, and the Fourth of July. Admittedly, this is hard to do when there is snow outside and temperatures do not easily suggest going to beaches, festivals, and picnics.

What is the reason for this? It's preparation time. Lead time is the period of time between the decision to write the article, the decision by an editor to buy it, and the appearance of the story online or in the publication. Preparation time includes securing rights, assigning photographers and illustrations, editing, fact verification, and production. For print publications, add more time for printing and distribution. Just for a second, think about the lead time for the story and photos about Halloween decorations on the cover of a magazine in the check-out area of your neighborhood grocery. Remember it must get to the store in late September or early October to be timely and have some favorable shelf life. When did that project begin? Months and months ago.

Jacqueline Shannon, a freelance seasonal feature writer and former magazine editor, said the mastery of timing is critical to success. Four months, she said, is a dependable industry average for magazines that use color. "If you're submitting on spec[ulation], your lead time is obviously not the same as the publication's lead-time. To give your article time to be considered, you must add 'reporting time' to lead-time. Therefore, if the reporting time for your targeted publication is one month, you must submit a seasonal story five months in advance. But don't stop counting yet. There's the possibility that your story will be rejected. So, you must also figure in a couple of months to market it elsewhere," Shannon (1984, p. 34) explained.

This brings a freelancer's lead-time to six or seven months. In other words, start circulating "Christmas Ornaments from Pine Cones" in May or June. Shannon said the same rule applies to queries on seasonal stories. Many publications, she said, will provide minimum lead time for you if you look for them online. Also, she advised, there is such a thing as too much lead time. Up to one year, she recommended, is acceptable, but only for important events such as the Olympics, an election, or a major public anniversary.

So, she said for the usual material, do not submit more than seven months in advance. This leaves a golden window of advance work from four to seven months for magazines and some infrequent newsletters. You become a calendar juggler, but to be an effective seasonal writer, this is part of the job. All this requires a seemingly simple decision to plan when writing seasonal features. This means developing an "editorial body clock," as Shannon labeled it.

It also requires writing alertness and discipline. While you are working in August preparing a feature for February readers, you must keep references to "this year"

and "last year" straight in your mind – or editors and readers will be confused for sure. Shannon also recommended saving a good article idea when the timing is off. If the subject is timeless, she said, it can be held a few months in the interest of timeliness.

Professor Emeritus William Rivers suggested seasonal feature writers should try thinking like department store managers and advertise their Christmas specials in July. Editors, like store managers, often need additional "stock" to use. "Editors also need stories that are not time-bound, stories that could be published at any time of year without losing their newsworthy qualities" (Rivers, 1992, p. 97).

There are numerous events calendars that have been placed on World Wide Web sites in recent years that may be useful to seasonal feature writers who need to plan. These sites provide chronological lists of major events. Some are regional calendars, as well, featuring events from a particular state or community. Some are specialized by subject or type of sponsoring organization. You can start by looking at your metropolitan daily newspaper's Web site.

Fresh Angles for Annual Stories

Features editors want to avoid is the same old seasonal story each year. So, it is necessary for writers to work with these editors to come up with a creative, fresh angle for an annual seasonal article. When it is a certainty that you need to write that St. Valentine's Day romance article, and the idea of another local couple's 60th or 70th wedding anniversary story bores you to tears (and probably your regular readers, too), it is time to work on a new approach. Ask yourself, "What's new this coming Valentine's Day?" Check with retailers such as card shops, candy stores, and florists to ask what they will be emphasizing to start. Check with small companies that offer special personal services such as breakfast in bed or singing telegrams to find out what unique ideas they are offering for the coming special day. On campus, ask sororities and fraternities what activities they are planning, such as singing Valentine greetings or flower deliveries in classes, and what they will do for fundraising.

You will find that, at times, these organizations and retail businesses come to you with their ideas in hopes of some advance publicity. Thus, you will find a cooperative source eager to help with your story. The strategy is to not limit yourself to a traditional story. Why stop short on a seasonal feature when you can give your readers a better story? Why do the same old stories if something stimulating is just waiting to be written?

Writer Clinton Parker argued that the formula is simple for a new angle: Fresh material plus solid background equals a successful story. Like generating any good story idea, a good seasonal feature must be the product of thorough looking around, talking to lots of people, and careful listening. It also takes thinking and an ability to put things together.

There are times when an old idea or theme has not been used for years, or at least, it has not been used as the basis of an article. About 40 years ago, what has become a classic seasonal "what-if?" feature story idea was generated. Reporters for the daily *Florida Times-Union* in Jacksonville were sitting in their newsroom at Christmas time, a traditionally slow news period, trying to come up with a good Christmas Day page one feature for their readers. Staff writer Jerry Teer wondered if it might not be fun to see if the true Christmas spirit still existed. "Do people really believe all this

Christmas stuff?" he asked. "And if they do, how deeply do they believe it?" To find this out, he asked the managing editor the following: "What if I wrote a story about what happens when myself and a pregnant woman, apparently my wife, visit inns around the city on Christmas Eve in search of a room?" (Teer, 1973, p. 24).

With his editor's okay, he asked a young female friend to join him as the two went from motel to motel looking for a place to stay for the night. They looked a bit ragged, wearing old clothes and carrying their belongings in a duffel bag. They told innkeepers they had no money and, with the help of a pillow, Teer's friend was dressed to appear that she was pregnant. This modern-day version of the Biblical story of Joseph and Mary on Christmas Eve became a widely read feature in the newspaper the following day. Although he hoped to find one Good Samaritan, Teer and his friend found no free rooms among the 15 "inns" they visited. This angle, far more interesting than a story about leftover Christmas trees, demonstrates what is meant by a fresh angle on an annual season or holiday assignment.

Sometimes seasons are impacted by unexpected events. This happened to worldwide fashion and its seasonal distribution and selling schedules during 2020, the first year of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Like many industries, fashion designers, producers, brands, buyers, and retailers were affected by changes in routine of everyone involved, including customers. Gordon Ng, fashion editor for *Esquire Singapore* and a contributor to *The Straits Times*, told readers about the need for transformation in fashion, calling it the "season for change in fashion" in his spring 2020 piece for the daily English-language newspaper.

> *SINGAPORE – Change is on the horizon for the fashion industry, incited largely by the absence of regularity and normalcy during this time of global pandemic.*
>
> *Designers, brands and retailers the world over have basically been on pause since February, when it became apparent that the coronavirus situation was not going to be simply swept away.*
>
> *Most recently, a group of fashion industry players, led publicly by the Belgian designer Dries Van Noten, came together to put forward an "Open Letter to the Fashion Industry". The letter outlines a clear intent: "to discuss ways in which our business needs to transform".*
>
> *The main way this is to be achieved is by realigning the seasonal flow of goods and selling seasons … .*
>
> (Ng, 2020)

Joshua B. Good, a feature writer for the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, offered a fresh idea for Valentine's Day features. In addition to the usual feature coverage about relationships and romance leading up to and on Valentine's Day, Good offered Atlanta area readers advice to keep the romance going after Valentine's Day. His story appeared 10 days *after* Valentine's Day:

> *The flowers are faded. The negligee is already in the bottom of the drawer. That heart-shaped chocolate box is sitting in the trash. It's only been a week, but already routine has replaced the Valentine's Day romance. So how to keep love alive the*

rest of the year? The odds aren't good. About 2.4 million Americans get married each year, but 1.2 million get divorced. In Georgia, the divorce rate is slightly above the national average. About 60,000 people get married each year in Georgia and 36,000 are divorced. Infidelity and disputes over money and child rearing are the key culprits, says Georgia State University Professor Elisabeth Burgess.

Atlanta is even worse than the rest of the state, Burgess says, because a large part of the population is from somewhere else. Transplanted couples don't have a local family network that supports a marriage or pressures a husband and wife to stay together, she says.

But there are ways to keep that love buzz going, the experts say. Turn off the TV and talk. Flirt. Make a date, even if you've been married for years.

Here's what else 10 relationship experts say about keeping romance alive all year long:

1. *Be thoughtful – Put surprise notes in your lover's briefcase whenever he or she goes on a business trip, says Mimi Doe, author of "Busy But Balanced: Practical and Inspirational Ways to Create a Calmer, Closer Family."*
2. *Anticipate – "If you have the time, stamina and desire, there's nothing wrong with having sex every day, but if that's your routine, I would also suggest taking a break from time to time. Try to keep your hands off of each other for two or three days and then see if the intensity of your next lovemaking session doesn't make such a wait worthwhile," Dr. Ruth Westheimer advises.*
3. *Tell the truth – "To keep the spark alive … is more about honesty and openness. It's more about telling the truth. It's about risking emotional openness, emotional intimacy. And it's scary because you let yourself be seen in all your nakedness," says Virginia Erhardt, a Decatur sex therapist and psychologist.*
4. *Take charge – "I look at my husband and I say, 'I want you and I want you right now.' And I take charge," says Laura Corn, author of "101 Nights of Grrreat Sex" and "The Great American Sex Diet."*
5. *Have fun – "When [my husband] walks out the door in the morning and blows a kiss to me, I say 'No way,' and I pull him back into my arms and give him a real kiss. I love to bite his rear end when he shaves in the morning. Those are the kinds of things that you have to enjoy with each other," says Millie Kagan, 81, of Druid Hills, a retired marriage therapist who has been married to Irving Kagan, 83, for 61 years.*
6. *Wait on each other – Each morning, Jeff Earle gets his two children ready for school and brings a cup of coffee to his wife in bed. "That's just downright sexy," Joy Earle says. "Bringing my coffee in the morning may seem like nothing to someone else." The Earles are Christian-based marriage coaches in Alpharetta.*
7. *Compliment – "Men come to me and say, 'My wife isn't sexy anymore.' And I say, 'Well, you're not doing your job.' "The key is to compliment your wife about how beautiful she is and how lucky you are. Then she feels special and acts sexy," says Doug Rosenau, a sex and marriage counselor in Atlanta.*

8 *Plan ahead – "You need to plan for sex. Scheduling takes away the worry about when it's going to happen. When you plan, you really get more excited. You can get pulled together," says Joan Sughrue, a sex therapist in Woodstock.*
9 *Surprise – Last year for Valentine's Day, Sally Lehr sent a barbershop quartet to her husband's office. Her advice: Do nice things to break up the routine. "Small things that say 'I'm thinking of you,'" says Lehr, who teaches at Emory University and counsels couples.*
10 *Laugh! – Have fun," says Bobb Patterson, an Inman Park marriage counselor. "Laughter is usually a sign of safety. When you are laughing with someone, it is the prime environment for romance. No fun, no romance. Singing to each other is fun. A shaving cream fight is fun. Dancing is fun."*

(Good, 2002) (Reprinted with permission *of* the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.)

Holiday and seasonal features can be a lot of work. To find out what is new for the summer vacation season or what will be different for the next Easter season, you must be willing to do some digging in the right places. It takes time to find the right travel agents, hotels, or tourist commissions to get that vacation story that comes out in late May or early June, the start of vacation time for many families, in the middle of winter. It might seem early, but this is when the decisions are, or already have been made. The same goes for the religious holidays such as Easter. You should not only contact stores for the commercial side of the story – new candies, stuffed toys, and the like – but also contact churches in your community for scheduled celebrations and services. You must work ahead and often push individuals for information to make your story timely when it appears.

Major U.S. Holidays and Seasons

January
New Year's Day (1st)
Martin Luther King's birthday (15th, officially, it varies)

February
National Freedom Day (1st)
Groundhog Day (2nd)
Constitution Day (Mexico, 5th)
Abraham Lincoln's birthday (12th)
St. Valentine's Day (14th)
Susan B. Anthony birthday, also Women's Liberation Day (15th)
George Washington's birthday (3rd Monday)
Ash Wednesday (varies)
Mardi Gras (varies)

March
Baseball training season opens (varies)
St. Patrick's Day (17th)
First day of spring (21st)
Mardi Gras (varies)
Palm Sunday (varies)
Good Friday (varies)
Easter (varies)

April
April Fool's Day (1st)
Palm Sunday (varies)
Good Friday (varies)
First day of Passover (varies)
Pan American Day (14th)
National Secretary Week (3rd week)
Easter Sunday (varies)
Easter Monday (Canada, varies)
Arbor Day, Bird Day (last Friday)
Daylight Savings Time begins (varies)

May
May Day, also Labor Day (Mexico, 1st)
Loyalty Day (1st)
Mother's Day (2nd Sunday)
Victoria Day (Canada, varies)
End of school year
College, high school graduation (varies)
Armed Forces Day (3rd Saturday)
National Maritime Day (22nd)
Memorial Day (last Monday)
Traditional Memorial Day (30th)

June
End of school year (varies)
Summer vacation season begins
College, high school graduation (varies)
National Smile Week (varies)
Flag Day (14th)
Father's Day (3rd Sunday)
Juneteenth Day (19)
First day of summer (21st)

July
Canada Day (1st)
U.S. Independence Day (4th)

August
Civic holiday (Canada, varies)
Ecology Day (varies)
National Aviation Day (19th)

September
Labor Day (U.S., Canada, 1st Monday)
Summer vacation season ends
Start of school year (varies)
Football season opens (varies)
Grandparents Day (11th)
Independence days (Mexico, 15th–16th)
Citizenship Day (17th)
Rosh Hashanah (varies)
Yom Kippur (varies)
First day of autumn (22nd or 23rd)
American Indian Day (4th Friday)

October
Child Health Day (1st Monday)
Columbus Day, Discoverer's Day, Pioneer's Day (2nd Monday)
Columbus Day (Mexico, 12th)
World Poetry Day (15th)
Thanksgiving Day (Canada, varies)
United Nations Day (24th)
Daylight Saving Time ends (varies)
Halloween (31st)

November
Election Day (1st Tuesday after 1st Monday)
Veterans' Day (11th)
Remembrance Day (Canada, 11th)
Sadie Hawkins Day (1st Saturday after 11th)
Elizabeth Cady Stanton birthday (women's rights, 12th)
Thanksgiving Day (4th Thursday)

December
First Day of Chanukah (varies)
Basketball season begins (varies)
First Day of winter (21st)
Christmas (25th)
Boxing Day (Canada, 26th)
Kwanzaa (26th–Jan. 1st)

Using Local Sources

The best-read seasonal material is localized. It is interesting to know what people are doing for a Fourth of July holiday 1,500 miles away, but readers really care most about what's interesting in their own neighborhoods and communities. A neighborhood parade or street party for the Fourth of July might just be the story. Or a city or regional magazine might want to begin the summer vacation season with an article on staycation destinations. You cannot ignore the activities in your own areas for the highest percentage of sales.

Local angles are defined in different ways, of course. A magazine looks at localization differently from a newspaper. Most national magazine editors could consider too much localization a potentially serious flaw in a story. Then again, a local or regional magazine might just be looking for that localized article on coping with winter storms. Newspapers are much the opposite. Most newspapers are edited for their specific communities – a market usually defined by the name of the newspaper. Some major metropolitan newspapers serve multicounty and even statewide markets. A few others, of course, are nationally circulated. In short, know the market and write for it in an appropriate fashion for seasonal articles just as you would any other feature article you write. And depending on the focus and market served by an online news site, localization can be either good or bad for the writer developing a new story.

Sources for Seasonal Features

- Online calendars
- Social media news feeds
- Social media pages devoted to specific events
- Published specialized or theme wall calendars
- Topical or theme appointment books
- Print and online almanacs
- State travel department calendars
- City, regional chambers of commerce
- Holiday festival committees, organizations
- Historians and local history museum staff
- Print and online encyclopedias
- Online archives for researching previous events and seasons
- Retail store sales managers and clerks
- Product manufacturers' regional sales representatives
- Web sites devoted to event calendars, specific subjects, holidays, or seasons
- Seasonal subject experts

Seasonal Color

Although you may have already given thought to writing color feature stories, it is important to point out that many successful stories capture the strong color of the season with description-based writing. Writers use seasonal feature assignments as a

chance to exercise their imaginations along with their descriptive writing skills. Description is important to some seasonal features. The event's unique atmosphere is present because of it. Readers sense it. However, use this descriptive and color-laden approach with caution and deliberate skill.

Professor Emeritus William Rivers said a little or moderate amount of description goes a long way in seasonal stories. "The worst flaw in seasonal stories is that the writer tries too hard to be overpoweringly descriptive. Instead, the writer should be content with touches of description: a few visual verbs, an unpredictable adjective or two, an adverb that is allowed to do its work because it's in a crisp sentence rather than in a sentence burdened with other adverbs." (Rivers, 1992, p. 251)

Like other color articles, many times a good seasonal story with a strong dose of color will use anecdotes to open the article. This form of storytelling draws the reader into the article easily, Rivers said.

An Editor's View of Seasonal Features

Doug Jimerson, retired content core director and editor specializing in gardening for the *Better Homes and Gardens* brand, edited seasonal features for much of his professional career. Jimerson, now co-owner of Studio G, a creative agency specializing in gardening, pets, and food, has learned much about the preparation of these stories for magazines and recommends that writers be concerned about appropriate timing in the preparation of the story. He explained:

> Obviously timing is essential when you're freelancing seasonal material. Every publication whether it is a newspaper or magazine has its own lead time that you must take into consideration if you want to successfully market your story ideas. At *Better Homes and Gardens*, for example, we plan our editorial calendar one year in advance of publication. This doesn't mean that we wouldn't accept a better story idea closer to deadline, but it does indicate how vital it is to be aware of your target magazine's schedule and plan accordingly.
>
> More important, you should know the editorial content or philosophy of any publication you solicit for freelance work. Nothing is more frustrating to an editor than to receive unsolicited manuscripts about topics that aren't even remotely related to his or her publication. For example, our magazine never publishes poetry, songs, book reviews, celebrity interviews, or first-person humor stories like 'How I Raised Bumper Crops of Broccoli in My Bathtub.' Yet, every week we're inundated with submissions like this from misguided writers across the country, usually with a tag line on the bottom of the page asking us to send payment as soon as possible!
>
> I realize that this all might sound pretty basic, but I can't emphasize enough the importance of research. Always take time to read and critique a few issues from the magazine or newspaper before you charge ahead with your own story ideas.

It's also smart to check an up-to-date masthead and read the by-lines of all stories. You need to know the names (correct spellings, please) of the appropriate editors you'll contact later. And remember, don't take notes from mastheads that are over one year old. Editors retire, die, get promoted, and move on to other publications.

One of my pet peeves is that I'll often receive unsolicited manuscripts that are addressed to the garden editor who was with the magazine in the 1950s. That shows me that the writer hasn't done his or her homework about the direction or scope of our magazine. I'd also like to suggest that you think about specializing in one or more subject areas. There's nothing wrong with being a good generalist, but if you strive to become an expert in a particular field, such as money management, electronics, parenting, architecture, food, environment, sports, or even horticulture, you'll have a leg up on the competition when a publication is looking for someone to write that 'special' feature. It's also a smart marketing strategy. If you can sell yourself as a proficient writer with a strong background in a particular subject area, you'll stand out from the rest of the thundering herd.

(Personal communication to author, September 19, 1988)

Chapter 13

Entertainment Features and Reviews

Dr. Robert Hosmon's wine columns have been purchased and used by as many as 1,000 daily and weekly newspapers, other publications, and radio stations each week through the McClatchy-Tribune News Service. Hosmon, a professor emeritus at the University of Miami, has written about and reviewed food, restaurants, and wines sold in the United States for more than four decades. His wine column is based at the *South Florida Sun Sentinel* in Fort Lauderdale. He served as a senior editor for *The Wine News* as well and often contributes as a freelance writer to other magazines and Web sites. It's a challenging freelance lifestyle of food and drinks that many writers both admire and envy. He explained how he views his work:

> Unlike other critics, restaurant reviewers have a unique responsibility to the subjects they review. A negative architectural commentary isn't going to cause the razing of a building. A bad movie review won't drive a theater to bankruptcy. The critic who finds fault with a dance company or symphonic orchestra's performance isn't going to provoke the demise of the company.
>
> But a negative review of a restaurant can, and often does, put that restaurant out of business forever. Therefore, while restaurant critics serve the public, they must also remember the responsibility they have to the men and women whose future livelihood depends on their opinions.

Hosmon said his education as a food and wine critic came slowly and informally. But he was willing to invest the time and energy into the work and it became a second full-time job for him. He has tried to maintain high professional quality for readers.

> Standards for a good restaurant critic should include extensive knowledge of food ingredients and preparation, esthetic judgment, and an understanding of how restaurants function as a business. Each of those qualities requires experience, experience that can be developed through study and personal investigation. Conscientious restaurant critics dine out often and in many places. In the process, restaurant critics develop a professional approach to the evaluation process.
>
> The professional restaurant critic will, in the final analysis, consider the intent of a restaurant when making a value judgment. A family-oriented, budget restaurant is not trying to provide the same experience as a gourmet French emporium. But

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> either restaurant can be judged as excellent—or poor—according to how well they succeed in doing what they set out to do. A good restaurant critic is never a causal consumer; he or she is a consummate observer, analyzing every food and every operation within the restaurant. Dining out for a restaurant critic is not a social occasion; it's a job.
>
> (Personal communication to author, October 6, 2008)

Creative expression in writing such as that offered by Robert Hosmon is an important part of contemporary society. And with the rapidly growing number of choices given for use of our leisure time, the role of interpreting and reviewing creative expression in the form of arts and entertainment is also increasing in value. Arts writers cover both breaking news and write features about their creative world. They often also take on the role of critical writers, venturing into the world of opinion expression.

Today's best-known and recognized arts writers and editors – such as Pulitzer Prize winners Salamishah Tillet (2022) and Wesley Morris (2021) of *The New York Times*, Christopher Knight (2020, *Los Angeles Times*), Carlos Lozada (2019, *The Washington Post*), and Jerry Saltz (2018, *New York* magazine) – seek better ways to take arts and entertainment features beyond the routine and ordinary. Publications, challenged by online entertainment and arts coverage, have worked to improve how they cover the arts and entertainment with depth and scope. Entertainment journalism is maturing alongside the more-established opinion-based arts reviews and critiques (for more discussion, see Hellyer, 1993; Titchener, 1998).

Many aspiring nonfiction writers associate writing reviews and criticism as a glamorous career filled with opportunities to mix with both the famous and infamous artists of our time. The work is attractive to beginners because reviewers and critics are often working at the cutting edge of such creativity as filmmaking, book writing, television and streaming services program production, music and dance performance, and theater production. Perhaps the lives of those who do reviewing and critical writing are often filled with glitter, bright lights, and black ties for the successful few who are nationally known full-time reviewers or critics. For most people who do review or criticism, it is a part-time specialization and seldom offers the lifestyles of the rich and famous.

Reviewing and critical writing are still two of the most popular forms of feature writing among young writers and students. Entertainment-oriented features are not far behind. With the strong appeal of the performing arts to young writers, it makes sense that many beginning writers seek to develop talents as reviewers and, ultimately, as critics.

However, it remains difficult for a nonfiction writer to build a career in reviewing and critical journalism. Most newspapers, magazines, and online publications – when they publish reviews or critical analyses of the arts on a regular basis – use feature syndication services and part-time or even volunteer writers – such as experts – for their stories. Only a few of the largest metropolitan area daily newspapers, news wire services, and features syndicates retain full-time reviewers and critics. Many of these positions have disappeared in the past decade as staffs shrink in size. Most daily newspapers cannot afford full-time critics or reviewers, or even entertainment writers. These organizations use other full-time staff to write reviews when time permits, or they use freelance writers if money is in the budget. Otherwise, they are dependent upon news services. Much of this, though, is not localized.

The Eight Roles of Reviewers and Critics

Rutgers Professor Emeritus Todd Hunt (1972) says there are eight primary functions of reviewers, critics, and entertainment writers:

- *First, and foremost, the reviewer informs readers about the arts* – Readers learn about the existence of new works from their favorite publications.
- *Reviewing and criticism help to raise the cultural level of the community, the region, and the nation* – By setting standards for performance, the cultural community is, in the long run, improved.
- *Reviewers and critics impart personality to the community* – By writing lively copy, expressing well-supported opinions, and by being a little bit different, the reviewer and critic provide a unique personal dimension to their feature writing.
- *Reviewers and critics advise readers on how to best use their resources* – Reviewers and critics help readers decide what films to see, books to read, restaurants to visit, and which theaters to attend. With limited entertainment budgets, many readers depend on their local reviewers and critics to guide them in making these decisions.
- *Reviewers and critics help artists and performers to fine-tune their works* – As an educated consumer, a qualified reviewer or critic can make suggestions that will help artists and performers to improve their efforts in later performances.
- *Reviewers and critics identify the new* – Whenever new works are offered to the public, and, at times, before these new works are presented for the first time, reviewers and critics can identify, interpret, and explain trends and new developments in the arts to their readers.
- *Reviewers and critics record history* – One of the best sources of performing arts history is the review. Reviewers and critics write arts history daily.
- *Reviews and critical writing are also entertaining* – As reviewers and critics impart personality, they also entertain with timely and interesting writing.

Magazines that publish reviews and criticism of the arts most often use regular part-time, freelance, or volunteer sources. Like newspapers of all sizes, some magazines depend on news services and features syndicates to provide their reviews and criticism. Online arts-oriented publications may use a mix of staff and freelance sources, but what an online publication does often depends on how much of its content is original or comes from other sources.

Reviewing and critical writing are quite different from other forms of professional feature writing. Generally, professional feature writers do not cross the line often from fair and objective writing into subjective writing and opinion, but reviewers and critics must take this bold step for their work to contain value to readers. That's why reviewers and critics are so widely read and valuable to consumers.

It is difficult to discuss reviewing and criticism without also discussing entertainment reporting. For many arts writers, the job involves regularly writing both reviews or critiques and news from their beats. A good reviewer or critic is a major asset for a publication by covering the arts as important news-based feature material. For example, film reviewers or critics are often called on to write the local story when a film crew sets up in a community to shoot. Regular book reviewers or critics are assigned to profile a local author who has written a successful new book. There are numerous roles the reviewer and critic play in serving their readers and the region's arts community.

Reviewers and Critics

What does it take to get a job as a reviewer? Much depends on the publication. Some small newspapers and magazines cannot afford to pay well, if at all, and may offer opportunities to beginners for little or no financial rewards. Some even use volunteers who write to get experience and published stories. Editors of these publications allow their reviewers to "learn" on the job.

Although your writing skills are probably most important in determining your success as a reviewer, the more educated, the more knowledge you possess about the art form, and the more experience you have as a reviewer, the better chance you have in finding a job. Motivation is also a key to being a reviewer or critic.

There is a significant difference between a review and critical writing, although some arts writers feel the distinction is an artificial one and not necessary. However, such matters are substantial. Reviews are generally written by less authoritative writers and often take the perspective of the consumer. Some critics feel the content of most reviews is less substantial. These articles tend to summarize the work and its major features but may not be evaluative. The review describes the work and its genre. It can also discuss the skill of the artist or author, even the quality.

The major distinction between reviewing and criticism is the expression of opinion. When a writer begins to include an opinion in the form of evaluation, he or she leaves the realm of objectivity for subjectivity and his or her assessments of artistic performance are offered. The line into criticism is crossed. This is also a more sophisticated, perhaps worldly, view of the art form.

Critical writing at this level usually requires specialization and higher education. One of the most important differences between reviewers and critics is educational background and experience. Most successful critics are college- or graduate-level educated in the art form they criticize. To be a critic, you must have some form of specialized education, and perhaps even amateur or professional experience as an artist. After all, what better credentials to criticize performance or an art form than to have been there? Certainly, individuals educated with majors in drama or film are going to be better-informed critics about the correct or preferred techniques in theater or movie production than someone who is not. An English Literature major or an author will likely be a better book critic than someone who is not. A person who majored in food and nutrition, or who has worked in food service or a restaurant would be better qualified to be a restaurant critic than someone who simply likes food and wants to dine out on an expense account.

To be a critic, you must know which standards to apply in assessing professional or amateur performance. You must be able to write what you think about the effort in a skilled and tactful manner. You must know what levels represent truly excellent work

and which ones do not. In fact, some experts on reviewing and criticism feel that because there are many unqualified reviewers and critics it might be better for news organizations to utilize artists as reviewers and critics.

It is becoming easier for beginning writers to specialize in the arts when in school. Because most newspapers, magazines, and newsletters cannot hire individuals solely for coverage of the arts, general feature writing or news writing and reporting skills are necessary. Universities and colleges with programs in mass communication and the arts are the best locations for academic preparation for careers as reviewers and critics. Schools that offer journalism majors and provide a chance to double major in an art such as music, drama, or creative writing will present learning opportunities necessary to be a professional reviewer and critic.

Writing Entertainment Features

Most reviewers and critics also write entertainment news and features. It is a natural extension of the specialization to be able to write both news and features about the subjects. It is a normal part of the beat responsibilities to cover breaking news, to write features, and to review or criticize. The work is therefore a mix of objective and subjective forms of writing.

Writing entertainment features can be as difficult as any type of feature writing. It requires the same reporting and writing skills. It may demand even more patience and resourcefulness because of the unique nature of the artistic community. There are many responsibilities and few people to cover entertainment beats in most publications. Like other forms of reporting, perhaps the most important ability is source cultivation. Developing sources of information about the entertainment world is your bread and butter.

Entertainment writers also seem to have more autonomy than other reporters. As beat reporters, they are specialists. They are expected to know about activities and events within their areas of expertise. Although entertainment reporters are specialists, it is possible to be even more specialized with beats within entertainment such as television, radio, cable, dance, restaurants, and music. Thus, it is up to the writer to generate story ideas and execute them. On occasion, editors propose or assign stories, but entertainment writers are expected to develop a high degree of enterprise in their work.

Along with that, many entertainment writers – as well as reviewers and critics – work from locations other than the publication's main office. Many work at home. Part of the reason is the nature of their work – it is not in the office and often during unusual hours. For example, long-time South Florida *SunSentinel* television critic Tom Jicha covers the television and radio industries, as well as regularly writing reviews and criticism about television and radio. Jicha, who has been at his newspaper since 1989 and is a former president of the Television Critics Association, says he depends on the telephone a great deal. "We [entertainment reporters] are a lot like cops; all reporters are. Without sources, we'd be dead. The way you get those sources is that you cultivate them on the phone. A lot of the time, I'll call people up just to chat, to maintain the lines of communication." (Jicha, 1993)

That, it seems, is the nature of entertainment feature writing. People, chatting, interviewing, Zoom sessions, observing, information gathering, and story production. Telephone and Web-based interviews can build stronger advances for big shows in a community, for example. Entertainment reporters connect with publicists as a way to reach their in-demand sources.

Getting to a location early, waiting, and then being ready at an instant's notice can be stressful and physically demanding. Covering major events such as the Academy Awards means standing in crowded rooms, waiting long periods, yelling questions at sources, being subjected to herd-like instructions of publicists, and other less-appealing situations. In fact, most entertainment reporters at a big awards event never get into the auditorium. They wind up covering the event from an auxiliary room (or adjacent building) set up with monitors. When post-event interviewing occurs, it takes place in a press conference forum with a chance for only one question, at best. There is rarely any exclusive interviewing that takes place at such events.

Most entertainment reporting at the local level does not involve such spotlight events. Those assignments might be the reward for a year of covering more routine entertainment news at the local level. These stories focus on shows at the local auditorium or arena, touring artists and performers, an occasional interview with a celebrity who visits or who lives in the area, and a lot of features about amateur productions and artistic efforts at neighborhood theaters, local colleges, and perhaps even high schools. The types of stories are often classified as nothing more than previews and reviews, some editors like to say. There is much truth to that, but enterprising entertainment reporters go much further with profiles, human-interest stories, seasonal stories, and a wide array of approaches to their beats. It is up to you and your skills to make the most of being an entertainment reporter.

Using the Essay Structure

Although entertainment features use a variety of organizational approaches, most reviews and critical articles find their way into an essay structure. This is a simple approach that permits the maximum development of writing. A good lead (or introduction) opens the essay with a statement of what you want to do. The body of the essay is a synthesis of generalizations about the work that are supported by evidence and illustrations that are taken from the work. The conclusion summarizes the points, and all this is done in just a few hundred to a few thousand words. Writer and Professor Emeritus William Ruehlmann recommended 10 points about the basics of what he calls judgmental features. Ruehlmann, book columnist and feature writer for *The Virginian-Pilot* in Norfolk for more than four decades, said there are ten recommendations to reach success as a critic:

- *Make yourself an expert* – The more you know about writing books such as novels, the more authoritative you will be and the better you can handle your assignment.
- *Don't flaunt your expertise* – Do not write over the heads of your readers. Teach, but do not assume too much about what readers know.
- *Don't talk down* – Assume your reader is intelligent and can understand what you write.

- *Avoid over-dependence on plot summary* – Do not tell your reader everything that happened. Tell the reader how and why something happened, but not what.
- *Explain the work in context of our lives* – In other words, he asks, is the work good entertainment? Does it help us better understand ourselves or understand the world around us? If so, it is art.
- *Find a strong lead and ending* – Be specific and arresting in your lead. End with a snap.
- *Cite specific examples to support your views* – If you say something good or bad about the work, show readers. This gives insight by providing your own reasoning behind the assessment.
- *Write well and write cleverly* – Apply the same standards for good style and structure that you expect in the work you are reviewing to your own writing.
- *Take your stand with conviction* – Do not be timid. Write with confidence and assurance.
- *Have a little charity* – Remember this when you are writing about amateur artists instead of professionals. But even in dealing with seasoned professionals, take into consideration all factors when you decide you love or hate something. (Ruehlmann, 1979)

Ruehlmann, a former professor at Virginia Wesleyan College, said that the structure of a review can be as varied as any other type of feature article. He said you must remain flexible to permit the review to take the form necessary to make your points understandable. He also emphasized the need for readable reviews. This is done, he added, by use of specific examples to support the opinion and to enliven the critical writing.

In review writing, the philosophical approaches of reviewers and critics fall into two schools: authoritative and impressionistic. Todd Hunt (1972) defined the impressionistic approach as one that generates an expression of the critic's reaction to the work, exclusive of standards or precedents. The work is evaluated in reference to historic models which have been previously judged worthy. The authoritarian critic must have considerable background preparation and exposure to the art form, and he or she necessarily accepts a set of fixed standards of rules. Most contemporary reviewers and critics are somewhere in the middle of the two approaches, Hunt said. Most attempt to take the best of both schools rather than fit into one or the other. "[M]ost feel free to switch into the more comfortable personal essay style, often leading to an 'I-like-it-because' conclusion" (Hunt, 1972, p. 29).

Selection of a lead is a significant decision. How do you begin? This part of your review sets the tone of the entire story and should be considered carefully before you begin. Perhaps you can open up with something startling about the artist. Express a strong opinion about the work. You have decided the work is weak and you want to warn readers at the beginning, so you choose an inverted pyramid approach by getting the "news" about your evaluation at the top.

Whatever you choose to say in the lead, your first several paragraphs need to establish the context. What work is being reviewed or criticized? Who is involved; when and where? As you move into the body of the essay, you tell your readers how and why. Some beginning reviewers are so anxious to get into the opinion, they forget to present the basic facts near the beginning of their essay. You should also avoid

clichés. These worn-out statements or phrases only drag down the quality of your writing and bore the reader. Find new and interesting ways to make your points.

Pressing deadlines may change the approach you take when writing reviews. It is one thing to dwell on a work for several days before committing your ideas to paper. For a debuting new play, film, television program, or touring musician, you might get just one shot and only a few hours to complete your work for a newspaper or online news site. For magazine or newsletter writers, deadlines present a different set of problems – remaining timely when you must produce your feature or review weeks, or even months, before a movie or book debuts. The problem is so severe for some magazines that they simply do not try to review certain types of material unless they can get considerable lead time through previews and advance copies.

A thorough review offers readers comparison and contrast. Readers want to know how a new book compares with the earlier works of a favorite author or how a new album will stand against the earlier efforts of a group. What is similar and what is different? Why? Is it relevant? Similarly, many essay reviews compare and contrast the works of different artists on the same subject or same level in a single review. It is not unusual, for example, to find a set of summer movie reviews packaged together or one review that discusses all the new summer releases. The technique is also popular with book reviewers who might look at new books on one subject – such as the Olympic Games, a presidential election campaign, or a trio of new books about the British royal family – in a single review.

It is also important to provide readers with an information summary with a review or critique. These information summaries are often separated typographically by editors to run within or beside the review. Many are used at the top or bottom. It is your responsibility to provide the information. As you read about the major forms of reviews and criticism in the following sections, you learn what is commonly needed in the information box for each.

Who Has the Right to Criticize?

Do readers care about what you say in your reviews? Do they care about your opinions? Some do and some do not. Some accept what a writer recommends because of the writer's reputation. Some ignore the comments or even laugh at your carefully weighed assessments. A few get very upset if you criticize their favorites. And, it seems, some readers just do not get involved one way or the other. As reviewers or as critics, writers have been given the right to comment in a professional manner about the arts of their town by their supervisors. It is a significant role in the arts community that must be kept in perspective. It is a form of public trust not unlike that of the city hall or statehouse reporters who cover – and assess – government performance for the public.

It must be done responsibly.

An important consideration is the legal limitation of criticism under the First Amendment and the various state constitutions. How far can a reviewer or critic go in expressing opinion before it is unacceptable? In terms of law, a reviewer and critic must be concerned with libel because of the potential for defamation of the character of an artist. Because libel law varies from state to state, the limits of criticism also vary according to state libel law. What a critic says might not be considered damaging

by a jury in a major city as easily as it would be in a small town in the more conservative regions of the country. If needed, always check with your media law professors and legal counsel at your workplace.

Generally, reviewers and critics are permitted to express their opinions, even if defamatory, on topics that are interesting to the public. This is the conditional privilege of "fair comment," a defense that has been used effectively for more than a century. University of Washington media law emeritus professor Don Pember explained that

> statements of opinion are often immune to a successful libel action. The courts have said that the rhetorical hyperbole—broad, exaggerated comments about someone or something—are obviously not assertions of fact and cannot stand as the basis for a successful libel suit.
>
> (Pember, 2003, p. 217)

The late media law professor Dwight Teeter and retired Western Michigan University law dean Don LeDuc added that common law and state statutes extend to

> even scathing criticism of the public work of persons and institutions who offer their work for public judgment: public officials and figures; those whose performance public taste in such realms as music, art, literature, theater, and sports; and institutions whose activities affect the public interest.
>
> (Teeter & LeDuc, 1992, p. 227)

However, Pember (2003) said the fair comment defense against libel in a review must be based on certain requirements: (a) the comment must be an opinion; (b) the comment should reflect on the public aspects, not the private, of the person's life; and (c) the comment should have a legitimate public interest. Still, Pember cautioned, the difference between fact and opinion is not that clear. The courts, he said, still wrestle with the distinction. This makes life difficult for aggressive critics and reviewers. Perhaps the best legal advice is that you should be able to back up what you say in the public interest with evidence and that you should be concerned with the context of the statement and the words themselves. This way, Pember said, the public can develop its own opinion about the performer or the work.

Film Reviews and Criticism

The art of writing film reviews and criticism is perhaps the most visible of any type. Film reviews are usually written when a motion picture makes its commercial debut. Film reviewers and critics employ several strategies to evaluate a new film. The most common elements are:

- Quality of storyline (plot), social relevance of the storyline, or the original source material.
- Performance of leading actors and actresses.
- Performance of the director.

- Consistency and quality of work of the technical support staff (such as special effects, cinematography, or film editing).
- Use of conventions such as symbols or color.
- Audience reaction and the film itself as a social event.

The late film critic Dwight Macdonald (1969), who criticized film for more than 40 years in New York City and influenced many of the current generation's critics and reviewers, said reviewers and critics need to judge film on different standards. He said two rules of thumb include "did it change the way you look at things?" and "Did you find more (or less) in it the second, third, nth time? (Also how did it stand up over the years, after one or more 'periods' of cinematic history?)" (p. xi).

To those main points in his book, *Dwight Macdonald on Movies*, he added five other standards by which he judged movies:

- Are the characters consistent, and in fact are there characters at all?
- Is it true to life?
- Is the photography cliché, or is it adapted to the particular film, and therefore original?
- Do the parts go together; do they add up to something; is there a rhythm established so that there is form, shape, climax, building up tension and exploding it?
- Is there a mind behind it; is there a feeling that a single intelligence has imposed his own view on the material? (p. ix)

It is also common for film reviewers to provide adequate background on key individuals involved in the film. Film scholars who focus on the director as the author of the film emphasize the "auteur theory" of filmmaking (Kael, 1979; Sarris, 1979). Todd Hunt (1972) said, however, a majority of film audience members are just not that interested in the author as a focus of a review. Most, he said, look at the importance or relevance of the film.

Film reviewers and critics watch a lot of films. An average week for a full-time reviewer or critic for a major publication includes enough time to view 5 to 10 full-length films. Some are previewed in theaters, but other new releases are streamed. Devoted film scholars who review or criticize films see some films much more than just a single time and they want to experience it in a theater, not streamed on a computer or television screen. In fact, multiple viewings of a single film are not unusual for the very best ones, or for personal favorites of veterans over a period of time. There is also the time spent each year at film festivals, industry meetings and conventions, and other special events. Just routine viewings, at two hours per film, are quite a time investment for a single workweek. Much of this time is spent on preview screenings.

Viewing previews is essential to the success of the film reviewer and critic. To gain access to previews, reviewers and critics work with studio publicists, public relations representatives, and promotion specialists to gain online access to private streaming Web sites. These individuals contact reviewers who are known to be associated with publications and provide log-in codes and passwords, but beginning freelancers must find these individuals and establish their need for access.

Students interested in writing film reviews or film criticism should read the works of the top critics. Excellent sources for examples of quality film and other arts reviews are *The New Yorker*, *New York*, *The Atlantic*, *The Village Voice*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*. Wesley Morris, whose work has appeared in *The Boston Globe* and, most recently, *The New York Times*, is a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner in criticism that includes film (2012) and the intersection of race and culture (2021).

Getting started in film reviewing may involve taking a back-up role to a more established writer. This means you must have a willingness to review the less important films that might not even rate preview showings. Other opportunities exist at less mainstream publications such as college newspapers, alternative and entertainment-oriented weeklies, and small regional arts magazines.

Film reviews and criticisms are accompanied by synopses of information about the film. This "information box" commonly used by newspapers and magazines usually contains some, or all, of the following information:

- Name of film, local theaters screening it, their addresses, and opening date. Some news organizations include ticket prices and links to purchase. Include streaming locations, if it is appropriate.
- Director, producer, and production company.
- Leading actors and actresses in the cast.
- Screenwriters, cinematographers, and music scorers.
- Run time.
- Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) audience rating.
- Your quality rating as reviewer or critic.

Television and Radio Reviews and Criticism

Newspapers and, to a limited extent, magazines are cover the broadcast, cable, satellite, and streaming industries at levels like never before. Streaming sources such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney+, Hulu, Apple TV+, HBO Max, Peacock, and Paramount+ get much of the current attention. Internationally, Tencent Video and iQIYI are among the largest. Through the 1970s and 1980s, a new type of reviewer and critic emerged with emphasis at that time on network television and cable. Today, these individuals focus on reviewing and criticizing new regular programs, major sports broadcasts, special programs, and other unusual activities of interest to local audiences. They view content on television, radio, satellite, cable, and streaming sources.

Many full-time reviewers believe they have the responsibility to reinforce experiences in common with viewers and listeners. They also feel it is their duty to alert viewers and listeners to worthwhile events, to comment about excellence in programming, and to inform readers on developments with local stations.

Opinions are also important contributions of television and radio feature writers. These are not limited to single programs or series, but can become more philosophical about trends, questions, and issues involving the industries and their audiences. Central Michigan University broadcasting professor emeritus Peter Orlik noted this "contemplative approach" is often taken by magazines because it fits a magazine's

production schedule more easily and appeals to more specialized audiences attracted to magazines. They are also different in that they tend to be longer and more thoughtful. "Such think pieces and the issues they raise are seen as mooring masts to which can be anchored the shorter and more transitory personality and audience reaction columns—previews and reviews," he argued. (Orlik, 1988, p. 44)

As film reviewers depend on advance showings for much of their work, so do broadcast reviewers. These showings are usually available on videotape or at the local stations of the community where the reviewers work. Much advance viewing is done with through streaming. Reviewers and critics are given streaming access a few days before the scheduled broadcast.

Television and radio reviewers and critics must do their homework. It means watching and listening to many programs each week. For *South Florida Sun Sentinel* television critic Tom Jicha, it means watching a lot of television each day and some of it not yet broadcast.

> I'll never review a show without watching the whole thing. But I won't watch a lot of shows at all. I just have to make a decision based on whether I have any interest, or if it is a new program or a mini-series. There are a lot of people who are going to be looking to me—and I know it sounds a little pretentious—for guidance: 'Is this worthy of my investment in time?' You have to tell them. But some of the programs that show up on the Discovery Channel, the Learning Channel, or Arts & Entertainment, some of that is the best programming on television, but some of it isn't,
>
> Jicha (2008) stated.
>
> You make a judgment at some point that people aren't going to tune in to watch certain programs. So why bother? So I don't watch a lot of the tapes I get. But the ones I do watch, I watch from beginning to end.

Jicha reviewed a new television show, "Little Britain USA" when it debuted on the cable network HBO. He was not bashful in expressing his opinion. Here's how he wrote it:

> *It's rare these days for comedy to be so outrageously shocking you find yourself saying, "I can't believe they did that."*
>
> *Little Britain USA will elicit this type of reaction again and again.*
>
> *A skit featuring Rosie O'Donnell is so over the top, the laugh line can't be described even euphemistically in a newspaper.*
>
> *Another vignette involves gun lovers, whose handling of their weapons produces the same reaction as Viagra.*
>
> *Not all the routines, few of which last longer than two or three minutes, are racy. One recurring character is designed to make the point that the British are the rudest, least-helpful people in the world. A hospital receptionist's deadpan "Computer says, no," would become a new pop-culture buzz phrase if Little Britain were more widely distributed.*

Humor as uninhibited and profane as that of partners Matt Lucas and David Walliams obviously isn't for everyone. However, while it is wickedly irreverent and politically incorrect, it is neither mean spirited nor "dirty" for the sake of being so. Some bits are tame enough for broadcast TV — but not many.

Simon Fuller, one of the Brits responsible for American Idol, pushed Lucas and Walliams to bring the show to the United States. "He came to us and said, 'What's happening in America?' And we said, 'Nothing, really,'" Walliams recalled.

Fuller steered them to HBO. "We thought HBO would maybe buy the format and do their own show with an American cast," Walliams said. "But actually they said, 'We want you to do the show.'"

They had a built-in cheering section among American entertainers, familiar with the show from its broadcasts in Britain, Canada or Australia. "We met Rosie O'Donnell," Lucas said, "and she told us that when she was in Fiddler on the Roof, she had given Little Britain DVDs to all her colleagues."

O'Donnell was enthused to be asked to participate. "Rosie was fantastic because obviously there are some pretty outrageous things in there, and she didn't ask us to change a word."

Paul Rudd and Robert Vaughn are among others who have become such fans that they agreed to appear in the U.S. edition.

Little Britain USA could become very big in America.

Tom Jicha can be reached at tjicha@SunSentinel.com.

On TV
Program: Little BritainUSA

Stars: Matt Lucas, David Walliams

Airs: 10:30 p.m. Sundays, HBO

(Jicha, 2008, n.p.)
(Reprinted with permission of the *Sun Sentinel*.)

Daily newspapers are the dominant outlets for these reviews because of publication deadlines. For the same reason, most magazines do not get involved in broadcast reviewing. Some weekly magazines, such as the newsmagazines, can do so in advance because of lead time given to them by sources seeking maximum promotional value for a special program or streaming series in a big circulation publication. Similarly, weekly magazines may review or cover the broadcast of programs after the fact if a program has strong impact or if ratings show an unusually large audience.

A review or critique of a television or radio program can serve a dual purpose. It may also serve as an advance story, alerting viewers of the coming program. Thus, with a dual purpose, writers must be careful not to reveal too much. And try to avoid using spoiler alerts as much as possible.

Information boxes about shows are common in many publications. It can be placed at the end and an editor will determine how it is used. The information box for a

television, radio, or cable program advance or review usually contains some or all the following information:

- Name of program, network (if appropriate), and local station(s) broadcasting it. Similarly, if it is a streaming service, give similar basics.
- Scheduled airtime(s), program length(s), and date(s) or on-demand information.
- Major actors and actresses. Director if relevant.
- Content category (drama, comedy, and so on).
- Capsule summary of content.
- Your rating as reviewer.

Live Music and Concert Reviews

For many younger arts writers, there is no more exciting assignment than to cover a live concert by a well-known band or solo artist. In fact, many reviewers and critics start out reviewing concerts or albums. Publications approach live music and concert reviews differently, mainly because of timing, deadlines, and multimedia capacities. Online publications reviewers, for example, can integrate audio and video links into their reviews. Traditional print publication reviewers cannot easily "excerpt" from performances. For newspapers, there are two types of situations that concern reviewers and create different writing strategies. First, there are musicians who are on tour and may make only one appearance on one date in an area. Second, there are extended concert appearances and dates by musicians in a community. You cannot handle each situation the same way.

For a one-night, one-time performance, a review might not be as helpful to readers from a consumer point of view. After all, they cannot use your review to decide whether to go. A way around this is to review an earlier performance by the same musicians in a nearby community. Nevertheless, reviews of one-night concerts are part of the coverage of the arts of a community. Certainly, persons who attended want to know how others assessed the show. It is important to note for those who did not go and are interested in what happened.

For artists that are scheduled for multiple shows in a community, you have more latitude in what you can do. A regular review serves readers in major ways, such as helping them decide whether to attend. Naturally, it is best to publish the review as quickly as possible after the first performance. Daily newspapers and online news sites usually publish the next day or, at worst, for a very late evening show, on the second day.

Most daily newspaper concert reviews stick to the basics because of their deadline constraints. These reviews, like other print media, focus on staging, sound quality, length of performance, audience size, audience reaction and involvement, names of songs performed, special performers present, unusual deviations of the performed music (such as live versions dramatically different from recorded versions of well-known songs), and the effort of the warm-up act.

Music magazines, on the other hand, must take a different look at reviewing live music because of their less frequent publication schedules. Some magazines simply do not attempt it because it is not part of what they want to offer to readers. Others do not review music because of their infrequent publication schedule and the months of lead time for production. Weekly magazines do so in a manner somewhat different

from newspapers. Most weekly magazines, such as the major news magazines, which attempt to write about live music, focus only on major artists and do so by writing a roundup-style review. This type of review is generally more descriptive than critical and incorporates information from several stops on a national or international tour, adds nonperformance highlights, and any other aspects of the events that surround a tour by a world or national caliber musician or group. These articles are part review and part event color or atmosphere feature, and perhaps even a little human-interest feature as well.

Your best source for information about a tour is an artist's public relations representative or the tour's road manager. Often, management PR people for the concert facility can also provide helpful local information. Digital press kits and other background information are provided most often by these sources if you make yourself or your publication known to them. Many musicians use social media extensively to promote their work.

The information box for a concert advance or opening night review in either a newspaper or a magazine for a series of performances (not a one-time show) usually contains some or all the following information:

- Name of main group or artist.
- Name of warm-up group or artist.
- Date(s) and location.
- Ticket sale dates and times, prices, locations of ticket sales points, and additional online ticket services. It helps to include additional fees such as parking.
- Your rating of the performance.

Generally, information boxes do not run with concert reviews that are written on performances that are one-time shows in a market.

Recorded Music Reviews and Criticism

Just about all adults and most children listen to recorded music in one form (streaming services or digital files on a portable device or computer). We listen to a wide range of styles (for example, pop, classical, rock, jazz, rap, R&B, country, easy listening) as well. Because digitally recorded music is so popular with the public, demand for qualified reviewers and critics in the mass media can be strong. Popular mass media devote considerable attention, time, and space to recorded music, perhaps more than ever before, a turf once reserved only by specialized music publications.

Reviews are quite popular as part of that coverage. Because music reviews appear regularly in many newspapers and general interest magazines, they are written differently than when they were found only in specialized newspapers, magazines, and online publications. There was a time when only the most devoted music listener could interpret the special language of these reviews. But because of the general audience interest in streaming music today – it is not just teens and 20-somethings – reviewers must write to be understood by more people. A review, taking on this added educational function, has helped bring up the public's level of interest and knowledge of different musical styles.

Preview copies of new music help reviewers and writers do their jobs in a timely fashion. Just as film and broadcast or cable reviewers stream content to preview their art, so do music reviewers and writers. Music publishing companies make music track files available to reviewers once they get on the company's promotion department mailing lists. Most of this is done by e-mail (for access information) and streaming Web sites today.

There are different levels of publicity lists. Some are more important – that is, perceived by the public relations people to be more influential – than others. To get on a promotional mailing list, contact the music companies with a legitimate request to be included. You will have to furnish the name of the publication you work for, its audience, and address. You may be asked to submit some links to previous work.

Preview copies are one reason many music reviewers and writers work at home. They can listen to the newest music on their home systems without distraction. For reviewers and critics and most music writers, it is not unusual to receive numerous new digital recordings a week. That makes a lot of music to consider. Reviewers cannot listen to it all. There is simply not enough time in the day.

There are several approaches to writing a recorded digital music review. Some writers prefer to read the "liner notes" – the words that were found on the back of a CD case, or in a press release – as they listen to an album. Or they read about the new music on a band's Web site or that of the label's Web site. Some listen to the album first without taking notes, just to get a "feel" for the album. Then they listen a second time for technical purposes and for details to cite. And some reviewers like to turn their sound system high for full effect while others prefer noise-canceling earbuds or full over-ear headsets. You might try a variety of approaches until you find a way that works for you.

Regardless of your approach, your basic purpose is to provide a description of the content of the album. After that, you should evaluate the work and provide as much background on the content and the artist as space permits. At best, you want to be clear and useful for your readers. At worst, you write solely for other recorded music reviewers in obscure ways that only the other reviewers and their friends will understand. Of course, you want to avoid that.

Classical music and opera provide exceptional opportunities for recorded music reviewing. Much of what has been said so far in this section relates to popular contemporary music. Todd Hunt suggested properly that education is a most important function of reviews of classical music and opera. "Because many readers are unfamiliar with all but the best-known works of the major composers, the critic must turn teacher when evaluating performances of music by lesser-known persons," he said (Hunt, 1972, p. 136). Hunt also emphasizes the need to analyze the technique of the artist when considering classical music and opera. This is, of course, applicable to the performance of established works. A particular challenge, he said, is new works. Changes in styles, techniques, and even instrumentation are worthy of your attention.

The information box for a recorded music review usually contains some or all the following information:

- Name of album and artist or group.
- Where it can be purchased, downloaded, or streamed or other formats in which it is available.

- List prices by format.
- Release date (if appropriate).
- Your reviewer or critic rating of the recording.

Book Reviews and Criticism

If you enjoy reading, writing book reviews may be an easy extension of that pleasure. There are many newspapers, magazines, and Web sites that regularly publish book reviews, although the number of newspapers with book review pages or sections has declined. Even with a decline in space and publishing opportunities, there are other outlets, such as specialized publications and online sites, for book reviews. Book reviewers are finding their work is in demand by online news sites and blog sites (Connor, 2008).

E-books and digital readers have made books more available and easier to access than ever. Books that are reviewed in most general market publications are often what are known as mass market, or trade, books that are found in most bookstores and for sale online. There is wide interest in them. On the other hand, there is also a growing market for specialists who write for more specialized magazines, Web sites, blogs, newsletters, journals, literary reviews, journals, bulletins, and quarterlies with readers interested in the latest book news and reviews.

In addition to growing online outlets for book reviews, there are numerous local and specialized markets for book reviews. These can include commercial newsletters, trade magazines, chain and independent bookstore publications, and book departments in locally edited magazines. Specialized publications such as business and trade magazines can devote space to reviews of books relating to the industry, so do not ignore this potential market. Smaller publications do not ask as much of their reviewers as do larger publications and are good places to start. For instance, established magazines and larger daily newspapers often use authors or individuals with advanced academic credentials to write invited reviews.

The late John Updike, a novelist who won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, knows something about writing and, of course, book reviewers and critics. The poet, playwright, and essayist once gave the art of book reviewing some thought in one of his essays, the foreword to *Picked-Up Pieces* (Updike, 1976). His five rules of book criticism included the following:

- Try to understand what the author wished to do, and do not blame him or her for not achieving what he or she did not attempt.
- Give enough direct quotation – at least one extended passage – of the book's prose so that the review's reader can, for his or her own impression, get his or her own taste.
- Confirm your description of the book with a quotation from the book, if only phrase-long, rather than proceeding by fuzzy precis.
- Go easy on the plot summary, and do not give away the ending.
- If the book is judged deficient, cite a successful example along the same lines, from the author's oeuvre or elsewhere. Try to understand the failure. Be sure it's his or her failure and not yours. (Updike, 1976, pp. xvi–xvii)

Updike also recommended not accepting review assignments you might be predisposed not to like or to like. There are many reasons for either stance. Furthermore, it is important to note that some publications will not solicit or accept reviews of second or subsequent editions of existing books. These may seem new to the author and the publisher, but most publication editors prefer reviews of completely new books. Exceptions are possible, of course, when a major change occurs in the new edition of a well-known and established book. For the most part, individuals new to book reviewing are best advised to work on first editions unless an editor specifically assigns a later edition. You may discover a similar attitude often accompanies sequels to established books. These are more likely to be reviewed than second editions, but they will be less sought after than reviews of the first book in a series.

Book reviewers and critics, like other reviewers and critics, must keep up with new developments in their field. Following the book industry is relatively easy if you look in the right places. Book publishing industry organizations, such as the American Booksellers Association (ABA), or writers' groups, such as the Authors Guild, keep members informed of developments. Their publications are helpful to monitor also. The ABA has useful content on its Web site (https://www.bookweb.org) and The Authors Guild has an extensive Web site (https://www.authorsguild.org). Both are primarily designed for members but do offer some public access content. Other publications are *Publishers Weekly*, The *New York Review of Books*, and *The New York Times Book Review*, commonly available to the public by delivery or online subscription or at some newsstands. There are many others of course, both designed for industry insiders and for the book-buying public.

Most of the time, general interest publication book reviews are written by individuals who have a specialization in the subject of the book, not people who specialize in writing book reviews. Editors look for staff and freelance specialists in specific subjects because of the levels of expertise necessary to evaluate a new work. Individuals who write book reviews need to know something about books, the authors, and book publishing. Reviewers for top-of-the-line national publications are often themselves, college and university professors, book editors, or authors. These individuals are rarely staff members and write their commentaries as freelance reviewers. Their depth of knowledge comes from writing itself, working in the industry, and from sophisticated study such as college and graduate level majors in literature or other specializations.

If you are looking for prospective books to review, Emerson College professor and veteran magazine and newspaper editor-writer Mark Leccese recommends doing your homework. Leccese covered government for New England news media for 25 years. He often writes book reviews and book articles. He decides what to review based on his publishing industry research:

> Get the publishers' seasonal catalogs or *Publishers Weekly's* seasonal preview, pick a few books you would like (and feel qualified) to review, and query book review editors proposing to review a specific book. Freelancers don't get to do the 'big' books, so look for high-quality niche books.
>
> When you query, make it brief, clear and always send clips. Choose areas of specialty for yourself (fiction, political books, etc.), and tell the editors you're

> querying. Never miss a deadline, always write to length and, at least when you're starting out, don't argue about money.
>
> (Personal communication to author, January 29, 1998)

Critic and author Gail Caldwell has written about books and book publishing for her newspaper for more than a decade. She served as book editor in the mid-1990s. She has a master's degree in American Studies and knows American literature. Her series of commentaries and book reviews for *The Boston Globe* in 2001 were honored with the Pulitzer Prize in criticism. She began one of the reviews from that collection, a new book by novelist Joy Williams with a strong statement of her views on the work.

> *"The Quick and the Dead" is fierce, lively, and shocking, and it possesses a tooth and-claw beauty as dangerous and breathtaking as a cougar on the move. Poet of the ironic and damned, Joy Williams delights in turning the world on its head: She can make a sunset into end-of-day carnage and the day's carnage into an act of natural grace.*
>
> *Few writers choose to inhabit these high crevices, where the pitch is steep. But Williams could scarcely live anyplace else. Her writing is so infused with terrible truths and dark comedy—imagine Cormac McCarthy bumping into Flannery O'Connor—that it's difficult to imagine her on tamer ground.*
>
> *Williams has applied her considerable intelligence over the years to the short story and novel as well as naturalist nonfiction, and "The Quick and the Dead" is her first novel in more than a decade. Its cast of characters has the familiar Williams stamp of transcendent idiosyncrasy: an eco-warrior teenager who's smarter than most adults; a dog more interesting than his human nemesis; a recently deceased woman who returns as a ghost to torment her husband (and give him stock tips). Together, they form a montage of the more colorful aspects of that great, pulsing monster we call life—which is, for some people, a euphemism for the necessary condition preceding death.*
>
> *Because really, "The Quick and the Dead" is a death trip writ large in gorgeous calligraphy: perfect scenes and dark intent and uproarious cosmic jokes, usually in search of sacred targets. Its loosely woven garment of a plot concerns three teenage girls, all motherless, who are thrust together by geographical circumstance one summer in the Arizona desert. There's Alice, the aforementioned genius-punk who understands corporate greed and imperialist mayhem better than most teenagers understand the Backstreet Boys. There's Annabel, her dialectical opposite, who thinks the world can be changed only by better nail polish or a daring tan. And finally there is Corvus, the heart of these three Furies:*
>
> *Corvus, who lost both her parents to drowning, takes dire action to purify her own life, then devotes herself to the half-living spirits at a nursing home called the Green Palms—a place we are introduced to as "state-of-the-art End of the Trail … ."*
>
> (Caldwell, 2001)

To reach the level of quality evaluation, writing, and commentary that critic Gail Caldwell offers her readers, you must work, work, and work some more. Often,

beginners seeking a place to start writing about books will simply volunteer as reviewers to establish themselves and collect links to their reviews. Although there is no money from the effort, it provides necessary experience and a body of work.

A Book Reviewer's Tips

Emerson College professor and book reviewer Mark Leccese regularly writes about books. He said his book review structure is flexible, depending on who will be reading the review:

> *The form, shape, and content of my book reviews depend on the publication's audience, the space I have, and the book itself. A piece about writing about books (or music, or film, or art) falls somewhere, I think, on a continuum: On one end are 'reviews,' ('It's good/It's fair/It's poor; here's what it's about') and on the other end is 'criticism' (which tries to place the work in a larger context: of literature, of works in the field, and so forth). Where I aim on that continuum depends on what the editor (and that means the audience) wants.*
>
> *I have no formula for a review. The book itself, and what I have to say, will determine the shape and tone of the piece. I do have a few touchstones, though:*
>
> Take careful notes as you read. *I use the (blank) first page inside the cover to note thoughts and comments I have, page numbers of important parts of the book, notes that outline the structure of the book. I underline, I dog-ear pages, I scribble in the margins. As a reviewer, you have to have something to say.*
>
> Write clearly, simply, and directly. *There's no excuse for pompous, turgid writing, and too many writers think that's how you're supposed to write about books. It ain't—not if you want readers.*
>
> Understand the point of the book, not just the plot. *What is the writer (novelist or non-fiction writer) trying to say? Why, in other words, did the author write the book? When you understand, tell your reader.*
>
> Quote from the book. *Don't just tell the reader about how the author writes and what the author writes about—show the reader. When you make a point, prove it.*
>
> If you can, read previous work(s) of the author. *This helps put the current work in context.*
>
> (Personal communication to author, January 29, 1998)

The best literary critics strive to achieve the level of excellence attained by the late Irving Howe, who wrote for many years for *Dissent*, which he founded, but also for

The New York Times Magazine. Howe was known as a book critic's critic. Although he wrote his own award-winning books, he was widely known for his thoughtful essays and criticism. He was an independent thinker who avoided trends and trendy writing throughout his 50 years of work. Individuals as successful as Howe, for instance, improve with experience and depth of study. Howe taught university-level English literature and he knew his material. Even beginners these days must know their material. A depth of knowledge is an important step in getting started.

To get the review process underway, get to know the book contents, its genre, and the author well. Look through it and then read it. Read the title page, note the publisher, read the acknowledgments, preface, introduction, and foreword. This is where you find out what the author says he or she is trying to do with the book. Skim the table of contents to get an idea of the scope of the book. Then turn to page one and read the book from front to back. Perhaps it may be surprising, but there are reviewers who do not read an entire book, or even parts of it, and try to write a review or even simply interview the author. A review can be written without reading the book, but the quality of the review invariably suffers and, thus, so does the service provided to the author, publisher, and the book-buying public. There are countless stories, and even comedy routines, based on talk show hosts, journalists, and others, about persons who did not do their homework.

Some background digging about the author is also important to understand the book you are reviewing. At times, the publisher will provide some of this information for you on the flyleaf or on an author page at the end of the book. Some publishers, when distributing review copies in advance of an announced publication release date, will provide a press release or biography of the author. Advance reader copies are available several months before the announced publication date, but often these versions are uncorrected proofs with minor flaws and are usually only available in paperbound or e-book form. These are extraordinarily helpful in getting an advance look at a book, providing time for you to read the book before writing anything about it and all before the official release date. There may also be summaries of the plot on the flyleaf or back cover that can be helpful to you in deciding if you want to review it at all.

While reading a review, readers want to know something about the author. Who is he or she? How did he or she come to write this book? A good review will integrate such information about the author and tell readers something about the author's previous works. It should be one or two sentences, but no more than a paragraph.

It makes sense to read as much of the previous works of an author as you can before you take on the current effort. This gives your review perspective and gives you the chance to compare and contrast. Like film reviews, a thorough book review will summarize content without giving away plots in addition to educating readers about the author.

The information box accompanying a book review usually contains some or all the following information:

- Author and title of book.
- Publisher and location, edition number (if applicable).
- Book availability in hard cover, soft cover, or e-book, and the prices. If it is a local or limited distribution book, tell where it can be found.

- Publisher's official release date (if appropriate, this is the date it is usually available in bookstores).
- Length of book in pages.
- Any special distinguishing features such as color images.

Drama and Dance Reviews and Criticism

Along with film, books, and television, drama is one of the major traditional subjects of review and criticism. Interest in dance, such as ballet and modern dance, is growing and it is becoming an important specialization for those writing features in the arts. Although the "national theater" remains centered in New York City, most people who write about drama and theater are not in New York. These are the people in the hinterlands and other metropolitan areas writing about regional and local theater productions at the professional and amateur levels.

Theater has spread across the country in the past half century, resulting in a rather sophisticated system of regional and community theaters and drama companies that are not based in Manhattan. There are audience-, school-, and local government-supported theaters in just about every metropolitan area that offer live drama and dance.

As a drama writer and reviewer, you have the duty to look at all the drama performances in your area, good or bad. Todd Hunt (1972) said the following:

> [T]he critic, who must attend all the plays, sees a theater that includes occasional ineptness and a great number of not-too-near misses. He knows that it is easiest to write a rave notice … . But more often he will have to struggle to explain a play's apparent purpose, where it failed its goal, and what rewards remain to be found. What makes it worthwhile, of course, is the occasional evening in the theater when the mind is engaged, the imagination is stretched, the intellect is rewarded. (p. 83)

Like reviewing and criticizing other art forms, you must be well prepared to write a drama or dance review. Some reviewers read plays before seeing them performed – easy to do on established works but not so easy with debut material. Others do not read plays, regardless of whether they are available. What you can do, if possible, is read other material by the same playwright. It is also important to learn as much as you can about the cast prior to the performance. Learn their names and roles, just as a sportswriter learns the numbers of key players in a game before it begins. Also note the producer, director, and the other behind-the-scenes personnel who contribute to the production.

You can get some of this background information from the playbill or program, but you can also obtain it from the promotion department of the theater a few days before the performance. As in book reviewing, be careful not to reveal too much of the storyline when reviewing a dramatic performance. Telling too much will spoil the experience for others. The critical elements in a drama review must address the play's plot and its relevance, the performance of major actors singly and as a group, the direction they received, staging and sets, costuming, sound, lighting, audience reaction, and overall assessment of the night's entertainment. Any unusual developments, such as

technical problems, should also be addressed if they affected the experience. Of course, reviewers often compare and contrast a current production with earlier versions of the same work by different companies or, in some cases, the same one.

The information box for a theater advance or opening night review for a series of performances (not a one-time show) usually contains some or all the following information:

- Name of play, author, or choreographer.
- Major actors and name of the touring company (if any).
- Date(s) and location(s).
- Ticket price scale, locations of ticket sales points.
- Your reviewer or critic rating of the overall performance.

Generally, these information boxes do not run with theater reviews written on performances that are one-time shows in a particular area.

Dance, although not nearly as popular in most areas as dramatic theater, still provides creative opportunities for reviewers and critics. Modern dance companies, many with uncertain or inconsistent local support, certainly deserve the critical attention of the local media. More traditional dance groups, such as ballet companies, are perhaps more stable and generally receive critical review when new performances are staged. Like classical music reviews, dance reviews must educate the public. Few readers of dance reviews thoroughly understand what they have seen; most will welcome assistance in interpreting what the performance achieved or did not achieve.

What do you concern yourself with in a dance review? The focus must be on two levels: the effort of the dance group as a whole or an entity and the effort of the troupe's star dancers or directors. Because a single performer or director dominates many dance groups, this is an important point of view. Todd Hunt (1972) suggested re-reviewing dance companies to measure the degree of growth and change in the company over a season. Because performances are not always the same, this is a helpful strategy if time and space permit it.

Markets for dance and other less popular arts are losing traditional places to find reviews. Newspapers are smaller and running fewer, for example. What has happened to fill the gap is specialized Web sites. In many metropolitan areas and in some college and university communities, Web sites focusing on the local arts scene have appeared. ArtBurst (https://www.artburstmiami.com) is one such site serving the South Florida and Miami area. It offers content about music, theater and film, dance, visual arts, and television. Such enterprises are funded by foundation and government cultural grants and generous other individuals and organizations. These types of Web sites are potential outlets for your work, of course.

Generally, information boxes do not run with dance reviews written on performances that are one-time shows for a particular area. A typical information box for a dance performance advance or opening night review for a series of dance troupe performances contains some or all the following information:

- Name of dance troupe and the title of performance or program.
- Names of the company director or choreographer, lead performer, and other artists, such as musicians, if appropriate.

- Date(s) and location.
- Ticket price scale, locations of ticket sales points.
- Your reviewer or critic rating of the performance.

Restaurant and Food Reviews and Criticism

Life as a restaurant reviewer or critic is a life of diversity, and, of course, calories. Amid the menus and wine lists are ways of handling the job, liabilities, and deadlines. Most food and restaurant critics are occasionally told how fortunate they are to have their jobs. *Milwaukee* magazine restaurant reviewer William Romantini said it happens to him.

"Everyone tells me how lucky I am to have the job. But, though eating for free can at times be a lot of fun, it involves some major liabilities," he admitted. (Romantini, 1987, p. 49).

First, he joked, his friends won't have him over for dinner. More realistically, he says he must endure several bad meals for every good one.

Most restaurant critics seek to dine anonymously. If the employees of a restaurant know them, it is possible the restaurant will give unusual and extraordinary attention in preparing the reviewer's meal. Some restaurants, sensitive to reviewer's influence in a community, will post pictures of reviewers on the walls in the kitchen for receptionists and waiters to study. Most restaurants prefer reservations and reviewers should make them. To remain unknown, though, they often use a dining partner's name. Of course, the experience of making reservations becomes part of your assessment of the service you receive.

Most people are willing to drive out of their way for an extraordinary dining experience. Robert Hosmon, an internationally syndicated wine and restaurant critic, has been commenting on restaurants and wine for more than several decades. Hosmon, a freelance writer who has worked as restaurant critic and written about restaurants, food, and wine for the *Miami Herald*, writes for the *South Florida Sun Sentinel*. Hosmon considers five important factors in writing restaurant criticism:

- *Food ingredients and preparation* – Is the food properly prepared as it is listed on the menu? Are the ingredients fresh? Is the presentation of the food satisfactory? One clue to judging a restaurant's capability is to select those dishes that are identified as specials, often carrying the chef's or the restaurant's name on the menu.
- *Service* – Is service efficient and courteous? Does the serving staff hover, creating an awkward situation for diners, or does it disappear, leaving diners to fend for themselves, waiting for more water, waiting for the check?
- *Decor* – Is the restaurant, visually, a pleasant place to be? Does it live up to its intentions and diners' expectations?
- *Ambiance* – Does the combination of decor, service attitude, size of the dining room, music, lighting, and patronage in the restaurant add up to a pleasant dining experience?
- *Price* – Is a visit to the restaurant worth the expense? Are any food items overpriced? Is the wine list prepared with reasonable mark-ups? Is the entire experience worth the price? (Personal communication to author, October 6, 2008)

Romantini adds three other areas of concern of the restaurant reviewer:

- The entrance to the restaurant and the first impressions you get as you enter.
- The attention you receive as you are seated and the appearance of your table (settings, its preparedness, and so on).
- Not the least important, the taste of food served, its temperature, and timing of service.

In evaluating food, be concerned with the main dishes, but do not forget the significance of soups, salads, other appetizers, breads, and desserts. Writing the review should be easy if care is taken to note details during the dining experience. It is difficult to write a review from memory, without some sort of notes. (Romantini, 1987)

Try to obtain a menu. Some restaurants will permit it if you ask. It is also quite easy to find menus online at restaurant Web sites and on numerous dining and entertainment apps. But beware, the online menus may not be complete and may not have current prices. Ask for an itemized check when you leave. Take some descriptive notes and photos with your smartphone while you are at your dinner table. This might give you away, but it does not have to do so. Be discreet. Turn off the flash, for example. Many businesspeople write notes during a meal. And it is common with today's tech, for people to take photos of their meals. With some practice, you can be inconspicuous in your notetaking and photography for your review.

Some reviewers write about their dining experience in chronological order. Romantini said writing should always be done with concern for the effect of what you say.

"[K]eep in mind the effect your opinion will have," he stated. "Can you look yourself in the eye and honestly write what you feel no matter what the consequences? Remember, it's easy to say nice things about someone, but an abundance of tact is needed if you've got to criticize" (Romantini, 1987, p. 52).

Some publications, because of monthly or even less frequent deadlines, choose to review several restaurants in a single story. These are roundup-style reviews and try to find unifying themes among the selected restaurants. This could be done using a style of food (e.g., Mexican or Middle Eastern), a neighborhood (e.g., the city's East Side or maybe a suburb), a category of service (e.g., guaranteed fast business lunches or self-service), and so forth. For a national magazine, it could be a major city or state's top restaurants. The information box for a restaurant review usually contains some or all the following information:

- Name of restaurant, address of location, and reservations, if taken, telephone number.
- Hours and days of operation.
- Type and price range of food served per person. Methods of payment (some do not accept credit or debit cards, and some don't take cash).
- Dress code, if any and if enforced.
- Your reviewer or critic rating of the meal (often broken down by quality of food, price and value, service, and decor).

Other Forms of Reviews and Criticism

There are a wide variety of other arts reviewing and critical writing specializations. Visual arts, for example, have become popular subjects for reviews and criticism in magazines and newspapers, especially. There is much more today that commands critical attention of writers. Among them are:

- Live entertainment (ice revues, stand-up comedy shows, circuses, and so on).
- Architecture.
- Painting.
- Sculpture.
- Photography.

Live entertainment reviewing and criticism have many of the same concerns as dramatic reviews and concert reviews. It is difficult to say anything negative about such all-American institutions as ice revues and circuses. You could, but few people do it. Instead of being negative, publications simply decide not to write the stories. These articles tend to be more review and less criticism. There is a limit to how much you can hold back. Judgment based on local standards may be your best guide.

Architecture reviewing has become increasingly important since a Pulitzer Prize for criticism was awarded to *The New York Times* critic Ada Louise Huxtable. Architecture critics such Allan Temko of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Paul Goldberger of *The New York Times,* and the late Paul Gapp of *The Chicago Tribune*, who were awarded a Pulitzer Prizes for architectural criticism in 1990, 1984, and 1979, respectively, are well known in their cities and in the industry. The construction boom in the Sun Belt has illustrated the role of major structures in creating the personality, or face, of a community in the past four decades and it continues. The new and rebuilt cities of the past century have been characterized by their architecture, and the role of the critic is becoming more significant. More and more people are realizing what a city's skyline and its major buildings say about the community. A handful of newspapers and magazines use architecture critics as their cities continue to change. Because there is no second chance in terms of a new building, these critics should be on the inside of what is happening in terms of planning in the community before it happens.

Other arts such as painting, sculpture, and photography are most often reviewed when presented in galleries and museums in special exhibitions and in new permanent exhibitions. These exhibitions often say much about the cultural status of the community that displays them, placing a degree of importance on criticism of these exhibitions. Most written evaluations of these exhibitions are descriptive, as they should be, for persons who might want to see them.

Visual arts criticism is earning more recognition at the national level. *The Boston Globe* staff writer and editor Mark Feeney was recognized in 2008 with a Pulitzer Prize. Feeney, who began at the newspaper as a news researcher, began to write book reviews part-time, and later became book editor, earned the award for his package of 10 reviews. During his almost 30 years at the newspaper, he has held several newsroom positions involving analysis, commentary, and criticism, most recently working

in the newspaper's Arts section. Here is one of those reviews about a photography exhibit at a Boston gallery:

During the many years between the rise of Jim Crow and the dwindling away of the civil rights movement, the "race man" was a sustaining concept in the African-American community. The race man was an individual of great personal accomplishment who was aware of himself as both explicitly representative of his fellow African-Americans and implicitly subversive of white American racism. Duke Ellington and Jackie Robinson may be the two most famous examples.

Charles "Teenie" Harris, who photographed them both, was a race man, too. Forty of Harris's images are on display in an absorbing show at Gallery Kayafas, in the South End. It runs through Dec. 29.

Over the course of a very long career, Harris took some 80,000 photographs - most of them while working for The Pittsburgh Courier. *That it was the* Courier *Harris worked for is significant. For many years, the newspaper had the largest circulation of any black publication in the United States.*

That may sound surprising. One thinks of Harlem and the South Side of Chicago as the capitals of African-American culture. But Pittsburgh's black ghetto, the Hill (most notably recorded in the plays of August Wilson and the novelist John Edgar Wideman's "Homewood" trilogy), was a thriving community. How thriving? Earl Hines, Roy Eldridge, Billy Strayhorn, and Art Blakey all hailed from Pittsburgh.

So Harris was in an ideal position for a photojournalist: a varied and richly interesting community to document and a large audience to follow his work. Visiting celebrities welcomed Harris's attention - and the space it would bring in the Courier. Included in the Kayafas show are pictures of Robinson, Joe Louis, Louis Armstrong, and a young Charlie Parker (performing with an equally young Dizzy Gillespie and nearly as young Billy Eckstine).

There's also a photograph of John F. Kennedy delivering an outdoor speech. The Courier's *circulation ensured that Harris's subjects were not restricted by any color line. It was, in fact, Pittsburgh Mayor David L. Lawrence who gave Harris his nickname, "One Shot," a tribute to the photographer's knack for quick composition and unwillingness to waste film.*

The keenness of Harris's eye is very much evident here. He had a fondness for tableaux: centering his subjects, showing them frontally, even when they're not consciously posed - as in "The School Patrol Guard" or "Little Girl and Her Dog in Newsstand." That's true even when his subject isn't a person, like "The Roosevelt Theatre in the Pittsburgh Hill District."

Of course, the sum of person and place is community, and community was Harris's abiding concern. There's a sense of shared life in all these pictures - a sharing among the people in them, a sharing between those people and the photographer. So often Harris's subjects look at the camera, as well they might.

These are proud, forthright individuals: not in-your-face, but not about to look down or away either.

Harris's subjects look right back at him even in situations where he clearly hadn't intended it (you can see how often One Shot had to shoot on the fly). Those looks presumably sprang from a feeling of alliance, even complicity, between artist and subject. In the magnificent "Four Elderly Women on a Swing at Lemington Home," Harris shoots the sitters diagonally. Yet the last woman on the right has shifted around to face the lens. She knew she had nothing to hide - just as Harris knew he had much to show.

Harris was sociologist as well as artist. So many of these pictures involve church, workplace, or leisure: people going about their daily lives, and those lives lived together. More than that, Harris's pictures convey an awareness of something being at stake. However indirectly, a statement is being made about the value of these people. Sometimes the statement is anything but indirect, as in a pair of protest photographs from the 1960s. But as with any gifted artist, neither direction nor indirection matters so much as execution. Ultimately, Harris's pictures aren't about life in black America in a particular time and place, or even life in America in that time and place. They're about life. Race man that he was, Harris had a noble agenda. He was too good an artist to be limited by it.

(Feeney, 2007, n.p.)

Like Feeney, Jerry Saltz, senior art critic for *New York* magazine, earned the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for criticism for his essays about visual art in America that looked at the personal, political, pure, and profane. A National Magazine Award winner in 2015, his stories examined the Whitney Museum Biennial, art at the Frieze New York, a new show by contemporary painter Kara Walker, a disputed painting being sold as a DaVinci, Michelangelo work on exhibit at the Met, and five others that evaluated visual art in the city during 2017.

Best Sources for Arts Information

Film
Individual film Web sites
Performer Web sites and official fan Web sites
Local theater managers
Promotional content, video trailers on social media
Regional or local film company publicists and publicity Web sites
National film company publicists
Distribution company publicists
Specialized industry-trade publications
Producers and directors
Film credits
Film company Web sites

Web film database sites, such as the Internet Movie Database (http://www.imdb.com) and the Internet Movie Script Database (http://www.imsdb.com)

Broadcast-Cable Television and Radio
Television and radio station Web sites
Network Web sites
Television and radio network publicists and their Web sites
Local affiliate publicists and promotion departments
Radio station publicists
Syndicated program distributor publicists
Specialized industry publications
Program credits
Promotional content, video clips on social media
Network and production company Web sites

Live Music and Concerts
Recording companies of touring musicians
Road managers
Concert and performance location Web sites
Promotional content on social media
Band and label social media pages, videos
Tour publicists
Musicians
Specialized industry publications
Specialized consumer publications
Concert site facility management
Recording label Web sites

Recorded Music
Recording companies' promotion departments
Regional or local record company publicists
Musicians and their own Web sites and blogs
Band and label social media pages, videos
Specialized industry publications
Specialized consumer publications
Jacket information of album compact discs
Recording label Web sites

Theater and Dance
Theater playbill night of performance
Theater Web sites
Theater managers
Actor and venue social media pages, videos
Actors and actresses, dancers
Specialized industry publications
Directors and choreographers
Theater company Web sites

Don McDonagh's book, *The Complete Guide to Modern Dance*
Walter Terry's book, *The Dance in America*
Phyllis Hartnoll's book, *The Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre*
Gerald Bordman's *The Concise Oxford Companion to American Theatre*

Books
Book jacket or flyleaf
Introduction, foreword, and acknowledgments of the book itself
Author and publisher social media pages
Publishers' promotion departments
Regional or local publishers' publicists and sales representatives
Specialized industry publications
Authors and their own Web sites and blogs
Publishing house Web sites

Food and Restaurants
Menus at restaurants
Restaurant managers, chefs
Restaurant social media pages and posted menus
Restaurant Web sites (often offer complete menus)
Public relations representatives of company
Local health inspector
Specialized industry publications
Local and state restaurant associations
Restaurant association and individual restaurant chain Web sites

Architecture
Gallery, museum, or show curator
Architects
Contractors, builders
Architect, firm, and builder social media pages, videos
Community social media pages, videos
Specialized industry publications
Financing sources
Local building inspector
Local and state architects' groups
Architecture schools and colleges' Web sites

Painting and Sculpture
Artist or sculptor
Specialized industry publications
Published major exhibition catalogs and books
Gallery, museum, or show curator
Gallery and museum Web sites
Artist, gallery, and museum social media pages, videos

Photography
Photographers and their own Web sites
Published major exhibition catalogs and books
Specialized industry publications
Gallery, museum, or show curator
Gallery and museum Web sites
Photographer, gallery, and museum social media pages, videos

Popular Live Entertainment
Specialized industry publications
Theater program on the night of the performance
Venue managers
Performer and venue social media pages, videos
Performers and their own Web sites, official fan Web sites
Performers' public relations representatives and their Web sites
Recording label and broadcast network Web sites

Often, painting, sculpture, and photography exhibits are housed in a facility together and a single reviewer or critic will be called on to discuss each in a single or perhaps separate review at different times. In these reviews, attention is seldom given to a single item unless it is so dominant that it commands the attention. Showings are also often presented by artists or by groups of similar-style artists.

Entertainment? No, It's Work

Michael Larkin, retired former deputy managing editor for *The Boston Globe*, feels that reviewers and critics have a difficult career – at best:

> Most people – readers and other journalists included – view critics and reviewers with bemused envy, seeing only that someone could get paid for watching movies or attending rock concerts, eating dinners, or reading some hot new novel. It's hardly work, right?
>
> Consider, though, sitting through a screening of "Rambo XI: Thin Blood" and trying to think of something informed and entertaining to write about Sylvester Stallone's peculiar, enduring artistry. Or how about hunkering down in front of the tube for a night of the new fall season: what to say about "Hocus Focus," a new hour-long drama about magician crime solvers? Perhaps Anne Tyler's new book is out. But, then, you've already been assigned five books for the week and the book editor has given that one to someone else … . well, maybe you'll get to it on your vacation (if you've the slightest desire to read anything more involved than the back of a Cheerios box).

Reviewing is getting paid for doing what people do in their spare time, Larkin observed.

> It is, I think, the most difficult, underestimated, long-term assignment in journalism: Do for a living what other, normal people do for relaxation and fun. Not only that, do it on deadlines only crazed sports writers live with and do it with the understanding that everything you write will prompt a disagreement with someone—readers who know more (or often less) than you do, even probably your editors who have seen the same performance and are hideously callous in venting their opinions. Consider, too, the artists' responses. A sample: "Bigger jerks than me review books, Nathan," writes Philip Roth in *Zuckerman Unbound*. And above all, don't make a factual error; you're the expert and your performance is as public as any play or TV program.
>
> So how does anyone do it? The critics I know love their work; almost all of them—despite crushing schedules—are trying to figure out how to cover one more thing or are panting about some upcoming event. Constantly learning about their specialty, they devote their lives to studying it: reading, seeing even performances they'll never write about, speculating about an entrée's ingredients at a dinner party. They thrill when someone achieves excellence or expands the definition of the form; they are mortified yet enthralled (though they may not write it that way) when they witness an all-too-public flop. Mostly, though, they deeply care about the attempts at creation. It is a caring that stems from a lifelong affection for the art; it is the key element in doing this job.
>
> No one gets to be a respected critic simply because someone gives them the job. Usually, critics gave themselves the assignment when they were young, and have spent most of their lives and education trying to figure out why some books are more moving, some films more exciting, some rock stars rockier. It is this fascination that endures. The best have it as a constant and are able to communicate it. It gives them an understanding of the past, an appreciation for the present and enthusiasm for the future, all essential elements in the confidence necessary to make judgments about the ambitious efforts of others, to review and to criticize with personal vision and voice. Without all this, a critic might as well be going to the theater for fun.
>
> (Larkin, personal communication to author, January 27, 1993)

About Ethics and Standards

Food critics such as those at *The New York Times* spend thousands of dollars on restaurant meals and other related expenses. Although these amounts are quite extraordinary, large news organizations pay for what used to be provided free by restaurants, theaters, book publishers, and record companies.

Who should pay for the entertainment you review? Should you pay for the tickets, records, books, or dinners? Students often think it is cool that the tickets and parking are "comped," but they don't think about the ramifications of such treatment. Many publications do not accept "freebies" for reporting and reviewing the arts, food, or travel. Most publications have two sets of rules for this important feature writing

issue. For full-time staff members, most major publications will reject free entertainment items unless a legitimate reviewer or critic uses the free ticket or new book in the completion of an assignment. Other unsolicited books, records, passes, and similar items are usually donated to local charities when received from a source.

For part-time writers or freelancers, these rules may or may not apply. The policy will vary. At some publications, part-timers or freelancers are left to their own decisions about who pays. Why? Usually there are clear expectations associated with the gift of free tickets, streamed films and music, and books. The expectation can range from simple recognition of the new work in print (news space publicity for no or little cost) to highly positive reviews and photographs, with large amounts of space.

There has been a changing set of expectations from those within the arts in recent years as ethical standards have tightened. They expect less. Clearly there are certain advantages to the special considerations such as good seat locations, obtaining high-demand tickets, receiving books or records in advance, and so on. It makes doing your job far easier. But there is a chance of abuse of these special considerations if you are not careful. The price is high, too, in terms of your credibility as a reviewer. And that of your news organization, too. Once you are "bought," you can never achieve the same levels of integrity in the business. It is a tough concession to make.

There is the also problem of dealing with sources. Reviewers and critics can become far too close to their sources. What is the result? There is the temptation to write unwarranted favorable, or too favorable, reviews. This also diminishes writer credibility. The two things a reviewer or critic has from the beginning of his or her career are integrity and credibility. They are worth keeping, regardless of the cost.

Chapter 14

Aftermath, Follow-Up, and Depth Series Features

Just about every year presents new challenges when major disasters strike communities and regions. Flooding in South Asia, Australia, and Brazil. Wildfires in the United States, Argentina, and South Korea. War-related migration by the millions out of Ukraine. Earthquake in Afghanistan. Record heat in continental Europe and the United Kingdom. Typhoon in the Philippines. Rivers and lakes in Asia and Europe at record low levels. Tornados in the United States. The list is long and impacts tens of millions of people around the world.

We cover these natural and man-made disasters. They create extensive breaking news for days and weeks consuming large news budgets and the time of news people. But what happens to these victims and their lives in the time that follows? Often, we return to find out. When we do, our reports are more likely feature stories than news stories and are important ways to update readers about the victims and their recovery and about their effort to regain their normal. We do these stories a year or two or five years later. Sometimes it is 50, 75, and 100 years later. And we revisit these major events and national or international news stories even decades later when significant anniversaries occur.

Vox (https://www.vox.com) promises its online readers that it explains the news. That means Vox can be a place to find feature stories about these disasters and what their impact has been and will be. In fall 2018, the Camp Fire, a major wildfire, destroyed the Sierra Nevada foothills town of Paradise, Calif., home for 26,000 persons. One November day, everything changed when the large wildfire approached and consumed the town. People evacuated, but the fire still took the lives of 85 others in California's deadliest wildfire.

Vox editors asked freelance writer Colleen Hagerty to look at recovery efforts a year later, asking, can these efforts return the community to its old self? Part of The Highlight section of the Vox Web site that attempts to explain world events, Hagerty's story examined public and private funding for recovery and found it was drying up. Hagerty, a journalist based in California who has also written for BBC News, *USA Today*, and the news site LAist, write a story about a lawsuit underway. But most importantly, she told the compelling story of the people most affected by the fire. She tells readers about the lost homes, businesses and workplaces, schools, and churches and how individuals were coping.

> *PARADISE, California — It was a bright, unusually hot September day on Skyway Road, and there was a distinct heaviness in the air that residents here knew all too well.*

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Smoke.

The smell, and the sight of the eerily beautiful, slightly hazy sunrise, were enough to put locals on edge, with some complaining on Facebook of an uneasiness that kept them up all night. Never mind that the smoke has a way of hanging over this town nestled between two canyons, and never mind that this particular fire, some 80 miles away, wasn't a threat.

Nearly a year after one of the nation's worst wildfires in a century swept through this California town, raw nerves remain.

For Erin Coyle, a 24-year-old with dark, curly hair and a dimpled smile, smoky days take her back to being 18, to the first time she experienced the ravenousness of fire, when a single-structure blaze consumed her family's Anderson, California, home. It left Erin with burns so serious that she was airlifted to medical care.

"I was in the hospital for a week after that, getting my dead skin scrubbed off my arms. It was terrible," she recalled.

Afterward, Erin, her mother, and her younger sister started fresh in Paradise, an enclave in the Sierra Nevada foothills that locals often refer to as the Ridge. Having missed enough classes after the house fire to require that she redo her senior year, she enrolled in Paradise High School. For Erin, this new town lived up to its name.

"I just fell in love with Paradise, to be honest," she said, searching for the words to explain what it was about this quiet place with tree-lined streets that felt like home. "This town kind of saved me and made me feel like I was human again." The words caught in her throat.

If you've heard of Paradise, it's likely because of what happened here — thousands of people waking up to a morning sky smothered by thick, dark smoke; hiding under their cars and using storm drains as shelter from the incoming rush of heat and flames; drivers shakily recording footage of traffic that had stalled as far as they could see.

It started around 6:30 am on November 8, 2018, a so-called red flag warning day with the ideal conditions for a wildfire … .

(Hagerty, 2019)

Major news stories – such as the Camp Fire in Northern California in 2018, or Hurricane Ike and its devastating impact on Galveston and Houston in 2008 or maybe Hurricane Katrina and its impact on New Orleans in 2004 – occur and continue to be in the public's mind for weeks, months, and even years. But readers come to the point where they want to know what happened to the town, and the people. A variety of types of feature stories are written. Often these stories evoke joy when good comes from the experience.

Or it can bring sympathy and sadness for the victims. Or perhaps. For example, *Cincinnati Enquirer* reporters Eileen Kelley, and Quan Truong (2008) joined together to write an aftermath feature about South Lebanon, Ohio, flood victims, describing the heartache of losses when the Great Miami River overflowed its banks in spring 2008. They interviewed numerous residents in their flooded homes. They talked to

officials as well. In another example, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* staff writer Jeffry Scott (2008) told the story of how tornado victims were organizing to restore their neighborhood in Atlanta's Cabbagetown. Just two days after the storm stuck, Scott talked with residents and community leaders of the historic neighborhood to learn about their determination and efforts to bring their lives back to normal.

New developments and new access to victims and the disaster site call for second or third or even additional perspectives of the event. Less immediate, anniversaries, and recurrences of the dates when these benchmark events occur, also signal an appropriate time to revisit and attempt to illuminate and further understand. The passage of time has a way of impacting on these events and new stories are often good reads. Feature articles are often the way we write about these special dates and events.

These feature articles have evolved into three basic types of features that are important to the news coverage of a community and nation. Those approaches are aftermath, follow-up, and depth series feature stories. What are they, exactly?

- *Aftermath feature stories* are written in the immediate wake of a major news story, typically an unpleasant or tragic event. These stories are assigned and written in the days after a big event story breaks, giving new insights into what happened and the effects of those events.
- *Follow-up feature stories* are written after an additional bit of time has passed, such as a few months, a year, or even several years. Follow-up stories often offer new information to shed new light on known events or revisit events to reinterpret them. These stories have a more evaluative, analytical, or interpretive purpose through use of experts, witnesses, legal documents, and people connected to the story.
- *Depth series feature stories* are a series of stories that take a subject into greater depth and scope than a single story could achieve for a publication. In addition to being published in parts, as the nature of a series would require, the depth series is more highly organized and offers a broader perspective through use of human and written sources of information. Depth feature articles in a series incorporate many of the characteristics of aftermath and follow-up stories, of course. With more news Web sites interested in such reporting and writing, sometimes these stories become longform depth features.

These three types of feature stories, although each a little different from the other in how the story is told, offer explanations and perspectives that were not available when the original events occurred, and the story first developed. The stories use large amounts of description, extensive direct quotations from interviewing, documents, and narration to tell readers more about the events that are the cause for the story to be written. Accidents, fires, bad weather, famine, rioting, war, and other disasters that cause high levels of human suffering usually demand additional coverage of the response in the form of aftermath, follow-up, or depth series feature stories. On the other hand, positive events or significant changes that bring happiness and joy to a community are also the occasion for aftermath, follow-up, and depth series features. The *Houston Chronicle* story about the citizenship ceremony of Hurricane Ike victims that was discussed earlier is such an example.

By showing the human angle, the story becomes less facts and figures and more "people-ized." It should also have a local perspective. Typically, aftermath articles

appear on the second, third, or fourth days after an event. Follow-up features are written in the weeks, months, or annual anniversaries after the event. It is also not unusual to use such follow-up stories years afterward. Some editors assign these stories one year, two years, or more after an event as anniversary features. They are assigned weeks in advance of the anniversary date so the stories can be ready when the date arrives. These stories are commonly found in daily newspapers, wire services, online news sites, and sometimes used in weekly newspapers. But they also appear in some magazines.

When something good happens for a community, such as a national sports championship or a major economic development such as the decision to build a new automobile assembly plant nearby, these stories also become highly read items. Although readers are naturally curious about disasters and other public traumas such as the 9/11 attacks in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania and the deaths of several thousand people, people truly savor the more positive success stories from our communities. Often an event is big enough that it cannot be handled as a single event or single story. Rather it becomes a series of events and dozens or even hundreds of stories over several weeks, months, or even a year.

Adding to the Original News Coverage

Aftermath and follow-up are terms that are often used interchangeably. The terms matter mostly to editors who use them to suggest the approach a story will have. However, there is a difference that you may have noticed from the discussion and examples so far. Aftermath stories occur most often in the days immediately after a major event or series of events take place. Follow-up stories return to significant events in a community's life also, but after much more time has passed and new information often comes to the story. These features revisit the major stories from time to time and, as a result, are a form of aftermath stories. The follow-up article is written with a stronger news approach and is often based on new or updated information, the facts, and additional details that were not available in earlier coverage of the story. Many publications still try to featurize such reporting when it is published. New developments in an event often lead to these articles.

There were dozens of aftermath and follow-up features in the wake of the unexpected death of Great Britain's Princess Diana. In 2022, 25 years after Diana's death, numerous feature stories were written about her enduring appeal, her public service, and the turmoil of her life within the British royal family. News and feature stories focused on the Paris accidents – one by automobile in a tunnel – and the possible cause, her professional and very public life, her public service and other contributions to various social causes, her relationships with other celebrities, the relentless coverage by the paparazzi, world reaction to her death, and countless other aspects of her life well lived.

Each follow-up story shed, in some way, new light into the workings and effects of a tragedy that caught the world's attention. How did these stories do that? They relied on investigations, interviews with relatives and other survivors, the release of information collected by government agencies involved in the case, and other similar reporting. Slowly, readers learned more about how the accident occurred and, more long term, why she remains a world figure of continuing impact.

After former professional athlete and actor O.J. Simpson was convicted of armed robbery and kidnapping in a Las Vegas courtroom in 2008, there was a significant reaction around the nation. In cities such as Los Angeles, where Simpson once lived and was acquitted of the murder of two persons in 1995, and in Miami, where he lived at the time of the Las Vegas trial, there was a natural interest in the case. Both the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Miami Herald* ran aftermath stories several days after the conviction recounting the reactions and thoughts of persons connected to Simpson, neighbors of the areas of both cities where he was known and lived, and those involved in the trial in California 13 years earlier. *Times* staff writer Carla Hall, with the help of numerous staff colleagues, wrote a 1,200-word feature that described the emotions evoked throughout Southern California, including Brentwood, where Simpson had lived in the 1990s. *Times* staff writers Joel Rubin, Esme Bermudez, Gale Holland, Carla Rivera, Robert Lopez, Catherine Ho, and Jessica Garrison contributed to the story. They talked to residents, legal experts, individuals involved in both the criminal and civil trials in California, and others deeply involved in the cases in Los Angeles and Las Vegas. This is the beginning of the story:

> *The verdict in the most recent O.J. Simpson trial came and went in the dark of night in a Las Vegas courtroom. The proceedings may not have been breathlessly awaited, but the outcome still provoked strong emotions through Los Angeles, a city indelibly marked by the first Simpson trial 13 years ago.*
>
> *This latest verdict was seen by many as a sad epilogue: either Simpson is getting what he deserves or he can't figure out how to stay out of trouble. Or both.*
>
> *"It's just catching up with him," said Vartan Tashjian, an Eagle Rock set dresser who watched Simpson's murder trial but did not pay much attention to the latest one.*
>
> *The issues, this time, were armed robbery and kidnapping, not murder and race. The verdicts were read without fanfare. It was not a day the Earth stood still, as it did 13 years ago for the reading of the verdict.*
>
> *"I woke up this morning to all these voice mails on my phone asking me to comment on the verdict, and I wondered, what verdict?" said Shawn Chapman Holley, a lawyer who was part of the team that defended Simpson on those infamous murder charges.*
>
> *But as news of the verdict spread, observers weighed in. "I just couldn't believe they actually got him on this, as opposed to a double murder," said Andy Brown, a travel industry manager who lives in Brentwood, just five minutes from the condo once owned by Nicole Brown Simpson … .*
>
> (Hall, 2008)

Writing Aftermath Stories

The aftermath is the result of an event, often an unpleasant result, in fact. News media continue to tell their readers about a major event in the first days immediately afterward by assigning writers to write aftermath articles. These magnify the focus on

a story and remind readers of the importance of the story. Daniel Williamson said aftermath articles are features that give new perspective "to a disaster, tragedy or profound news event that captures the impact and dimensions of the event by humanizing its effect." (Williamson, 1975, p. 179)

Aftermath articles tend to contain more of a people approach than the traditional news follow-up. And although these stories often focus on disasters and tragedies, they also focus on other actions, decisions, and developments in the community. When a river overflows in an unusual spring flood, how does it affect those involved? Readers want to know the basic facts, such as deaths, injuries, daring rescues, and damage amounts, but they also want to know the human element – the reaction to all this. How do people endure? What are their feelings and thoughts? Emotions manifest themselves in many ways. An effective writer tries to capture those displays of emotion to truly tell the story in the article. This is what happened when a severe flood tore through Fort Wayne, IN.

The description in writer Dan Luzadder's column, written on daily deadline for the Fort Wayne *News-Sentinel*, offered his personal reaction to the disaster. He told readers in a compelling way how this event in 1975 changed the lives of residents of his community on that day and, probably, forever. Because it was a column, it had many personal observations and feelings that came from Luzadder, instead of the usual variety of nonpersonal sources. Luzadder went to the neighborhoods where the flood hit hardest and talked to many Fort Wayne victims. Still, his generalizations about the community's reactions capture the mood and portray the plight of victims. There is no one named, no heroes – except the community itself – and no one directly quoted. Although it is a highly personal approach, it still achieves what an aftermath story seeks to do – and Luzadder's column earned him a share of a Pulitzer Prize awarded a year later for local general spot news reporting by his newspaper.

Daniel Williamson (1975) said the aftermath stories about events such as floods and other disasters use one or more of four primary approaches:

1 *The epitome of the victim or the victims* – This strategy focuses on the one person or group of people who have endured the disaster such as a plane crash or a hotel fire. There may be only one real victim for the focus of the article, such as a child who becomes trapped in a well and must be rescued before the child dies. You try to focus on these individuals by finding the survivors, who become your key sources. If none is accessible, then friends or relatives may assist in telling the story.
2 *The mood piece* – These articles employ many of the techniques of color stories and are dependent on detailed description. These articles help those who were not present to gain insight into the atmosphere of the site, using witnesses, survivors, photographs, and other means of recreating what happened. Dan Luzadder's award-winning column is an example of a mood approach.
3 *The hero* – In some assignments of this type, the best way to tell the story is to focus on an individual who saved the day. Or it could be several people. There will be times when this person is accessible and quotable. It creates a much-desired angle for the story because most people love to read about a hero and this form of the great American success story. Numerous hero stories are written each year about people who rescue others. When an Amtrak passenger train derailed after striking a truck in Missouri in 2022, numerous stories were written in the following days about Boy Scouts who were on the train who helped remove

people from overturned cars and provide first aid to injured people as well as the story of one scout who comforted the dying truck driver.

4 *The goat* – Occasionally, someone or some group, unfortunately causes a tragedy, sometimes called the goat. This includes the driver of the Mercedes who may have been responsible for the accident that killed Princess Diana. Investigations into the cause of her untimely death focused on the driver and whether he was under the influence or drugs or alcohol. Furthermore, there was significant interest in a group of press photographers, the paparazzi, that was following the Mercedes carrying the princess and whether the "chase" nature of the situation contributed to the accident. The story becomes stronger if you can tell the story from that person's point of view. Because most people or organizations are understandably reluctant to talk to a reporter if they have caused a death or large amounts of property loss, this is a difficult angle to pursue. Regardless, if it can be told this way, it is a compelling story since it is a human story, one of accidental or intentional human error.

You might not have a choice about which approach to choose in handling an assignment. Much of the time, the course of events determines how you handle the story. But on some stories, you may have the choice. You have several writing decisions to make when you are working on an aftermath article. You must develop your lead, decide the article's structure, locate sources, select a writing style, and decide the article's mood. Let's look at these in a bit more depth:

- *Aftermath lead* – The lead of the article is most important. You set the stage for the entire piece, and your decisions about how you plan to tell the story to readers are revealed. Aftermath leads can be anecdotal, focusing on an individual or an example of the major point of the story. This approach makes specific points to illustrate the larger problem – the suffering of one victim can show what an entire group of survivors has experienced and how they feel.
- *Structural plan* – Think through what you are trying to achieve with the aftermath article before you begin to write. How will you organize it? What are the major sections? What are the major points and in what order?
- *Sources* – At the same time you think through the organizational plan, consider what sources are necessary to make your major points. Will it be victims, their families, official sources such as police and firefighters, other people, reports, or observations?
- *Writing style and mood* – Your chosen style and mood for the story should reflect the type of event. In other words, for an article that describes the joy of a small town several days after it has won a state high school basketball championship, an informal, casual, and upbeat style might be appropriate. But for a natural disaster, such as a tornado striking that same small town, the style should be more serious and respectful.

It is important in writing aftermath stories to bring in the local angle as much as possible. This is easy enough for local events. It might not be so obvious for events that occur hundreds or thousands of miles away. Williamson (1975) offered four more considerations for writing aftermath articles. Your approach, he said, should stir the imagination of readers by going beyond the basic facts of the event that are

found elsewhere, such as other articles in the same issue or earlier issues. Here's what he suggested to strengthen your writing:

- *Play heavily on human emotion* – Use descriptions of sorrow, fear, happiness, and other emotions to enhance your article. This comes through direct quotations and observation of what happened and its effects on people and places. Can you accurately convey what people experienced? Exercise your vocabulary for this – accurate word choice makes all the difference.
- *Try to help the reader identify with the victims* – Will readers think that it might have happened to them? If so, you have probably succeeded in helping them identify with the victims. Writing with detail permits this to happen in most articles. Be alert and observe to recapture the situation.
- *Write tersely and briefly* – A tightly written article will still get to the point and permits more perspective to get to the reader in the same amount of space your editor has assigned to the article.
- *Concentrate on a fast-moving, strong lead* – Good leads set the tone for the article. For aftermath articles, you must write a lead that gets the reader involved and still explains the purpose of the article.

Writing Follow-up Stories

In 2022, numerous news organizations researched and published feature stories about the 50th anniversary of the Watergate break-in in 1972. This political burglary of the Democratic Party national headquarters offices was the moment when the series of events that led to the resignation of recently re-elected President Richard Nixon in 1974. There were stories about key figures involved in the case and the subsequent investigations and their personal memories of what had happened. Each story was told in feature form. And there were stories about individuals who were not in the limelight but still played a part in the story. One of those people was the man who sold the blank recording tape to the White House that became such an integral part of the investigations when it became known that Nixon had recorded everything that happened in his Oval Office. The man's name is Fred Burke. *Washington Post* columnist John Kelly, who He specializes in covering the less-famous side of Washington, wrote the perspective (Kelly, 2022). Here's how he started his story:

> *On the 50th anniversary of the Watergate break-in, it's time to meet the man who sold all that blank reel-to-reel tape to the White House, 18½ minutes of which became famous for what wasn't on it, not what was. His name is Fred Burke. He's 89 and he keeps the subpoena he received from Watergate investigators framed on the wall of his Florida home.*
>
> *"I started with Kennedy," Fred said. "When Johnson took over, we did a lot of things for him."*
>
> *And Nixon? We'll get to him. …*
>
> (Kelly, 2022)

Miami Herald writer Luisa Yanez told readers about a 1972 passenger airplane crash in the Everglades in 2007. Her story is an example of how a print story can also be used in multimedia formats online. At her newspaper's Web site, miamiherald.com, Yanez's story was divided into five sections – an introduction, the flight, the crash, the rescue, and the aftermath. With each section, there are archive photos, current-day photos of the survivors, video from historic archives narrated over the video by flight attendants mixed with present-day video of the crew members, an animated simulation of the crash, and even a 1979 recording of a song made about the crash by singer Bob Welch. Among the extra features included online were the National Transportation Safety Board final report, radio transmissions between the pilots and air traffic control in the final minutes before the crash, images of the memorial site, recollections about the event in a book, and a poem by one of the flight attendants about her survival of the crash.

The Eastern Airlines jet crashed into the Everglades west of the Greater Miami area, killing 101 persons. But 74 individuals survived. Any such accident is a tragedy and one that creates strong emotions at the time and in the years afterward, but this accident occurred just four days after Christmas and two days before New Year's Day. *Miami Herald* reporter Luisa Yanez (2007) was determined to tell the story after 35 years in her anniversary aftermath story. Yanez, who today is a member of the newspaper's editorial board and coordinates the *el Nuevo Herald* Opinion pages, developed what became a front-page story and a multimedia story package in five sections for the newspaper's Web site. This is the first few paragraphs of her feature:

> *Drenched in jet fuel and smothered by debris, 23-year-old flight attendant Beverly Raposa struggled to free herself from a jump seat and blinked her eyes to adjust to the pitch blackness surrounding her.*
>
> *She had survived a jumbo jet's violent crash into one of Florida's most mysterious places: the Everglades. It was just before midnight on Dec. 29, 1972.*
>
> *Remarkably, Raposa could hear the cries of other survivors. Crawling through the darkness and muck, she found fellow flight attendant Mercy Ruiz, 29, of Hialeah, who had been hurled from the plane. Bleeding from her forehead, she was still strapped to her seat.*
>
> *"What happened, Beverly?" Ruiz asked, confused.*
>
> *"Honey, we crashed."*
>
> *"No, we didn't crash, Beverly. It's a bad dream. We're gonna wake up."*
>
> *"No, Mercy, we're down."*
>
> *Raposa would spend the next grueling hours fighting for those who survived the crash of Eastern Airlines Flight 401.*
>
> *On Monday, Raposa and the other 74 "miracle survivors" will remember the 101 who died by observing the 35th anniversary of one of South Florida's worst airline crashes.*
>
> *This is their story.*
>
> (Yanez, 2007, p. 1A)

Best Sources for Aftermath and Follow-up Stories

Participants, victims
Friends and relatives of participants, victims
Neighbors
Witnesses
First persons to arrive on the scene afterward
Spokespersons from investigating federal, state, and local agencies
Public records and reports as they become available
Private sources of information released to the public
Social media pages for connected and associated groups
Web sites devoted to the event or emergency and related subjects

Follow-up features are often an appropriate choice because, after a time, readers seek background information and any new information to refresh them of events surrounding the original story. Although traditional for newspapers and wire services, the second day, or follow-up, the approach is also used by some magazines and other specialized publications.

Newspaper editors believe in the importance of follow-up stories, especially as new information becomes available on a months-old or years-old breaking story. Follow-up articles have wide applications. In addition to general news coverage, follow-up articles are often used in sports coverage as anniversary stories, meaning they give new information such as what key players and coaches are doing now and how their lives were changed by winning a championship or making a memorable play.

These types of feature stories, with their new information combined with the already-known information, help readers. Earl Maucker (1993), retired editor and vice president of the Fort Lauderdale-based *South Florida Sun Sentinel,* said that his newspaper's research shows that readers want relevance and the ability to understand the events of the day from their newspaper's follow-up on major stories.

"They want to understand their world," he said. "They want follow-ups on stories. They want those follow-ups to be balanced and fair, to list information, to explain and describe trends, to provide analysis, and to show them, not tell them."

Follow-up feature stories, if they are written well, can help readers to understand why something has occurred by adding new information and to share the reactions key people in the story had. They are, as Maucker explained, essential supplements to coverage of events.

News Value of Aftermath and Follow-up Features

Mike Foley, master lecturer in journalism at the University of Florida and former vice president and executive editor of the *St. Petersburg Times* (recently renamed the *Tampa Bay Times)*, believes in the value of aftermath and follow-up features. Foley, who spent 30 years at his newspaper, offered this advice:

> The feature story after the big disaster, the crucial vote, the key game, or that triple-axe murder is not only real journalism, but it's your time to shine. You'll

have the time, space and, probably, a lot of freedom to decide how best to handle the story. How often do you get an opportunity like that in this business?

But it's also a challenge. Your usual excuses—or, rather, reasons—for a less-than-stirring account won't work. The deadline is farther off than a few hours or minutes. You can talk to more people. You can get the details. You will be able to sort out the confusion. Then, you can sit down and—can you believe it?—write.

So, you've got challenge, you've got opportunity. Can the possibility of massive, career-ending failure be far behind? Of course not. So, before you blow it, you might consider a few suggestions:

Relax. Take a few deep breaths, a blank piece of paper, a pen or pencil, and figure out what you need to do. This preparation should include reading stuff already written on the topic, and planning other research, including public records, historical documents, books, and outside experts. (You'll find later that background information is almost as important as the new reporting you'll do.)

Talk to your editor. He or she has either assigned this story, or, at least, has permitted you to pursue it. Only an expert (or a fool) would work on a story without talking it over first with the boss. This also will allow you to find out how much time and space you'll have. You also should, at this point and throughout the gathering and writing stages, think of other material that will enhance the story—photos, maps, charts, illustrations. Your editor will thank you for any suggestions.

Editors like to look good, too.

Think about what you want to do. Sound redundant? Maybe it is. But many writers, especially young and beginning ones, forget to set goals. They're after a 'story,' without thinking about what the story might be. Sure, the story will change many times as you gather information. But it helps to start with some idea of where you could be going.

Don't forget the little things. The follow stories are the detail stories. What's the dog's name? What did the family eat for dinner? What was the dead guy wearing? Conduct a sensual survey. What music was playing? What scent was in the air? What was everyone drinking? Was it hot? You get the picture. Really, this way you really get the picture.

Feel it. Attention, all you aloof, neutral observers: It's time to get real. If you want to write a good story (even gather enough material to fashion a good story), you have to let loose, be a human. Don't take sides or get involved, but use your own emotions to try better to understand what the human in your story might have felt. Tell me a story. Sure it's journalism, but let's not forget what a 'story' is. It's a narrative, with a beginning, middle, and end. Reread your research, study your notes, shut your notebook (and maybe your eyes for a minute) and tell me a story. Step back and tell it whole.

If you have done your job, I'll even read your story, maybe all the way to the end. And that's my ultimate compliment."

(Personal communication to author, October 10, 2002)

Writing In-depth Features

There are times when routine feature coverage just cannot do the job in a single story. Even longform magazine articles might not be adequate for certain subjects. Major topics in the news, such as the people behind a major presidential election campaign, senior abuse in retirement homes, the sudden collapse of a condominium on the beach, or a public health issue such as the COVID-19 pandemic, often demand more than a single article can accomplish. Usually, this occurs because of one or more of these characteristics:

- *Magnitude* – An issue often affects many individuals and communities. Public policy issues, such as providing pandemic vaccinations, rising housing costs, inflation, taxation, or daycare, affect many individuals and often demand depth coverage. Coverage telling how many people are impacted must also offer the human side of the story by illustrating it through the eyes of the people involved.
- *Seriousness* – Certain matters are necessary to cover in depth because of their serious nature. For example, the discovery of contamination of a major source of public water requires thorough attention. Aside from the straight news approach, feature approaches examine the personal impacts such a problem brings to a community by looking at individuals and at the group.
- *Immediacy* – Because certain subjects are current, they cannot wait. Public concern about an issue, such as the potential risks of a new COVID-19 variant, shortages of infant formula, or the potential fire dangers of e-vehicles, requires attention in such a fashion that stories must serve the community's immediate thirst for information. Fear of the unknown often creates problems that compound existing troubles, so educational-instructional articles are a public service. These stories illustrate the situation by humanizing the problem so readers can identify with the subject at their own level. Answering questions such as "How does this affect me?" makes a depth series successful.
- *Scope* – A depth feature series usually evolves when a subject is broad in scope, encompassing several subtopics that must be covered in adequate detail to make sense to readers. Often, a trend is significant enough to justify thorough analysis and illustration through a series of features.

Some inexperienced writers feel writing short articles is easier than writing long ones. It becomes easier to handle longer material because you have more opportunity to use the information you have collected. It is also easier because of the additional dimension of organization that serialization permits (Rivers, 1992). A feature series should be a highly organized look at a subject that is neatly and cleanly divided into parts of equal significance. The pieces within each series installment need to be linked together with transitions. The pieces of the series should be presented in a logical fashion with linkages as well. Series installments are often accompanied by editor's notes at the top or bottom of the story, sidebar boxes, visual components, and other short editorial devices to explain to readers the purpose of the overall series, as well as

the role of the individual story that they are reading. Each part should be written to stand alone. That is, an individual part should be strong enough and self-explanatory enough to be useful to readers who did not see earlier, or will not see later, parts.

Thomas French (1998), a journalism professor at Indiana University and feature writer for the *St. Petersburg Times* for 27 years, wrote a highly compassionate look at the deaths of a woman and her two daughters on vacation in Florida and the ultimate capture of their killer after three years. The project was entitled "Angels & Demons" and won the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing. French specialized in project-length features during his time at the newspaper now known as the *Tampa Bay Times*. His stories in the narrative style offer image-creating details and depth of information that are the results of months of extensive research and interviewing.

He uses a technique often called "immersion reporting" in which he spends lengthy periods of time with sources and records to prepare for the writing and storytelling process. French prepares his lengthy features in serialized form. Several of his projects have led to popular nonfiction books. Here's the introduction to the project:

> *In their last hours alive, Jo Rogers and her two daughters took a series of snapshots. One showed Michelle inside the motel room, sunburned and staring into the camera. But it was the very last photo that would be the most haunting. Shot from the motel balcony, it caught the sunlight fading over Tampa Bay. The three women were about to leave to meet someone who had offered to take them for a boat ride on the bay.*
>
> *On June 4, 1989, the bodies of Jo, Michelle, and Christe were found floating in Tampa Bay. This is the story of the murders and their aftermath, a story of a handful of people who kept faith amid the unthinkable.*
>
> *One year had gone by since the murders, and then another, and now the investigators were deep into a third. They were working day and night, working weekends, putting off vacations, losing weight, gaining weight, growing pale and pasty and haggard, waking at 3 a.m. with a jolt and scratching notes on pads beside their beds. Their sergeant did not know if they would ever find the answer. As far as he was concerned, the case was not even in their hands.*
>
> *Ultimately, he believed, it was up to God whether they made an arrest. A born-again Christian, the sergeant carried a Bible in his briefcase. He had no doubt that both heaven and hell were real. He saw good and evil not as theoretical or philosophical concepts, but as absolute realities walking upright through the world. He believed in the forces of light and darkness. He believed in demonic possession. He took it as a matter of fact that Satan and his cohorts currently reigned over the Earth.*
>
> *"I believe there are demons all around us," he would say, "just as I believe there are angels all around us."*
>
> *And when he looked at the evidence from the case before them now, studied the photos of the bodies and the ropes and the concrete blocks, the sergeant had no doubt that he and the other investigators were pursuing someone driven by Satanic forces.*
>
> *Of course demons were real. They were hunting one now … .*
>
> (French, 1998)

Writing a Feature Series for Newspapers

For projects as extensive as French's "Angels & Demons," organization is a key. While it could have easily been published in seven or eight parts, it was published in one long special section. French labeled them chapters in his work. There were seven. Sunset. Haunted. Neighbors. The Tin Man. Silver Bullet. The Magic Kingdom. Night Stories. French's story pushed the limits of what newspapers thought longform writing might be. His story was challenging even for a magazine or Web site at 53,000 words. He was fortunate to have editors supporting the publication of this work. But it was a remarkable story and a compelling experience for those readers patient enough to get through it all, much like a short story or short novel, and maybe impossible in this digital age of short attention spans.

A writer or editor planning to publish such a story will often opt to use a series. He or she should outline the project first, then refine the idea for each story as the research and writing develops. There should be a minimal overlap of the subjects and there should be an editor's note at the beginning or end of the story to inform readers that the article is part of a series and that other articles have been published and will be published on the topic. Newspapers have used the feature series approach for many years. They have found a home on newspaper Web sites, if not in print, due to space limitations today. Editors will use a series to draw readers into the newspaper over a period of time. The topics for a newspaper feature series vary as widely as single features.

Writing a Feature Series for Magazines

It may seem quite unusual for a monthly or less frequently published magazine to run a series, right? With all the space a magazine can give to a major article, why would it need to serialize? It is more common than you might think. Magazines, especially the specialized ones, occasionally run a feature series of two, three, or more parts. Usually, this is done not because of a space crunch, but because an editor wants to develop an ongoing readership habit. This is common for newer magazines and for those that have a high proportion of newsstand sales.

Newspapers and magazines also publish serialized or excerpted books on some occasions. This can occur when the author is a staff member of the publication or a book publisher is looking for publicity to push demand in advance of a new book's release date. Typically, it occurs when major daily newspapers or larger magazines buy rights to new blockbuster books before release. Some newspaper and magazine editors use these advance peeks if they feel excitement about an anticipated book by a popular author is substantial enough to justify it. They see it as a chance to build their own circulation.

The serial approach is also useful for specialized business and industry periodicals, such as magazines and newsletters that must cover issues of a highly technical nature for readers with specialized knowledge. The approach works well for magazines and newsletters with readers with sophisticated levels of knowledge, but it also works for new or not widely known subjects of common interest to readers.

Chapter 15

Travel Features

Jane Wooldridge, senior director for Journalism Sustainability and Partnerships for the *Miami Herald*, has worked as an award-winning travel writer and the editor of Travel section. She was, during that time, also president of the Society of American Travel Writers. Wooldridge has a deep background and travel experience required of successful travel journalists and continues to write occasional travel features for her newspaper despite her management role today. In fact, she helps manage coverage of tourism, cruises, real estate, the economy, urban development, and visual arts and major international arts events in the region such as Art Basel. She explained how she got started as a Duke University student:

> My first trip abroad was as a student in the month before I attended a study program at Oxford University; my traveling companion dumped me, and I unwittingly ended up on my own. I was scared to death … but fell completely into wanderlust.
>
> After internships at newspapers in North Carolina and Virginia, I joined *The New York Times* Sunday Magazine as a fashion writer and stylist, where my own personal devil wore Calvin Klein, as Prada had yet to make the scene. After a year, I joined the ranks of the unemployed, a state in which I remained until taking a job as a personal assistant to a brilliant and wretchedly self-absorbed economist. Eventually I escaped, moving to Miami to work at the *Miami Herald*, where my assignments have included writing fashion, features, society, a local column, a business column, and travel. In between *Herald* assignments, I spent two years at a sister company, Destination Florida, where I led the creation of the first editorial destination website back in the dark ages when most average people had never heard of the Internet.
>
> (Personal communication to author, September 16, 2008)

Wooldridge has been recognized for her work as a travel writer and editor, earning the Lowell Thomas Travel Journalist of the Year from the American Society of Travel Writers for her stories and photographs. She has traveled extensively during her career. In addition to editing the travel section, she has written a regular travel blog for the newspaper, written numerous features, and travel columns, and taken photographs and videos during her trips.

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Wooldridge makes an important distinction between travel writing and travel journalism. For beginners, it is important to recognize the two different functions. "There's a difference between travel journalism and travel writing. Sometimes they cross paths; sometimes they're on different planets," Wooldridge stated. She added:

> Let's start with travel journalism, something that for me is paramount. The job of a travel journalist is objectively to provide information for potential travelers so they can make the decisions that will help them get the travel experiences that suit them best. That's not a frivolous matter.
>
> In America, vacation time is extremely limited—many people get only two weeks per year. In the past decade or so, Americans have taken on the view that vacations aren't a luxury; they're a necessary escape valve and a birthright. Those two weeks may be the only real chance to recharge worn-out mental and emotional batteries, to cement a relationship with a partner, to create memories with children, to bond with parents and siblings and friends, to stretch their imaginations and world view and sense of self and place. So, helping someone to find the vacation that's right for them really is a public service. That doesn't mean helping them find the vacation that's right for you, the writer. Not every experience rings everybody's bell. And though knowing the audience for which you are writing certainly is essential, you can't truly know the needs, desires, and preferences of every one of your readers. So, it is important to be as objective as possible.
>
> (Personal communication to author, September 16, 2008)

Americans are always on the go – except maybe during pandemics. They spend a lot of money and time going from place to place. Some of the travel, of course, is for business, but the COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted business travel. Pandemic or not, there is considerable travel devoted to pleasure and other personal reasons, such as vacations and weddings. Americans spend a lot of money on travel, too, both domestic and international. Visitors also spend large amounts when they come to the United States. In some parts of the nation, tourism and travel is at the heart of the local economy. In Hawaii and Florida, for example, global-based travel and tourism are dominant factors in entire state economies.

Travel is simply big business. Writing about it as a business story makes sense, but the numbers also suggest a lot of people are traveling and they, logically, want to know what they can do on these trips and how to travel better when traveling.

Enter feature stories about travel.

International visitors to the United States spend billions in non-pandemic times. Canadian, Mexican, British, Japanese, German, and French visitors are among the most common. Not only are large numbers of people coming to the United States, but Americans also travel abroad. Even in small towns, tourism may be the big story. In Branson, MO, for example, a community of about 11,000 residents, there are more than nine million visitors each year (History of Tourism in Branson, 2022).

Many people travel substantial distances. And even if they are not going far, they still want to travel. With gas prices at averaging around a record high of $5 a gallon across the country, and more than that in some states, in 2022, "staycations" which many people called their local vacations, became popular. Personal travel activities

are not singularly focused. Americans travel to visit families, go shopping, visit historical places, attend special events such as festivals, gamble, enjoy the great outdoors, tour national or state parks, enjoy the beach, and participate in sports such as skiing and golf.

No wonder travel is big business and involves a lot of people. And no wonder there are many publications devoted exclusively, or in part, to travel. The American public is traveling more than ever before, creating a growing market for travel writing. A wide range of publications, print and online, are used for guidance in making travel decisions and for getting the most out of travel budgets. For most writers, travel stories are fun assignments. Perhaps one of the most glamorous feature writing assignments is to write about an exotic, faraway land. People are enriching, not escaping, their lives by travel. Those who travel do so frequently. They are interested in cultural and historical locations and places of natural beauty in addition to nightlife, luxury, or shopping.

Important factors in planning a vacation or other leisure trip include a location with natural beauty, a place where the traveler has never been, freedom to decide what to do during the trip, and the opportunity to experience local culture and history. Less important factors in travel are recreation, luxury resort areas, nightlife, and shopping.

Travel market research shows that people who consider themselves seasoned travelers take several trips a year, including trips overseas. The leisure traveler is not a young person and may have more time on his or her hands. Much of the travel writing designed to help both leisure and business travelers make decisions about their trips is done by freelance and part-time writers. Most daily newspapers have at least one staff writer or editor assigned to travel content, and many larger dailies have a weekend section filled with color photographs, feature stories, and news about interesting distant places. Content comes from news services, staff working as internal freelancers, and external freelance writers.

Magazine editors depend on travel-oriented features by freelance writers or regular contributing writers. Many national and regional lifestyle consumer magazines offer readers travel stories that appear with regularity. And, of course, there are numerous travel-oriented periodicals, such as *Conde Nast Traveler, Afar, Travel/Holiday, Coastal Living, Discover Britain, Travel & Leisure, and Global Traveler* on the consumer magazine market and dedicated to a person's urge to wander. State and regional publications in the U.S., such as *Arizona Highways* and *Texas Highways*, also focus on travel in their respective states and regions with similar content.

"Travel changes everything are words my colleagues and I have been using to describe the mind-opening, eye-opening, and transformative potential of travel," said *Travel & Leisure* magazine editor-in-chief Nancy Novogrod. (2008, p. 22) "You could say we're going out on a limb at a time when the impact of mass tourism and mass transportation on both the natural and the man-made environments has become extremely difficult to deny. But we are devoted to getting our readers out into the world, knowing that to experience its wonders is to become more keenly aware of their preciousness and their fragility, and more committed to guarding against a kind of global blending of the distinct features that draw us to destinations."

Travel magazines are among the national leaders in editorial pages produced, with more than 3.7 million, and were one of the top six categories in new launches in 2019. Many leading travel magazines focus on worldwide and national destinations and attractions, travel trends and issues, helping readers travel better, the airline industry, the cruise industry, luggage, resorts, hotels, rentals, restaurants, and tips from experienced travelers and travel industry professionals. Some are specific to their company or product line and others are more general in nature.

The largest national travel magazines generally have five or six main feature articles, including a cover story. There are also regular monthly departments, such as those devoted to letters from readers, food, shopping, personal care, wine, the world weather outlook, books, business travel concerns, upcoming current events in major cities around the world, new travel products, and opinion articles such as columns and editorials. Naturally, this list is just a sprinkling of the possibilities. Travel publications make heavy use of color photographs, illustrations, maps, and other graphics to help readers understand the subjects about which they are reading.

There are also growing specialized markets for travel-related features in the travel industry and trade publications. These include periodicals of travel agents; hotels; convention and tourism organizations; convention planning organizations; tour operators; bus companies; attraction operators; rail lines, cruise lines, and airlines; and recreational vehicle sales and service businesses. These publications are geared toward individuals who work for businesses associated with the travel industry. Examples of these publications include California's *RV Business*, published for the recreational vehicle (RV) industry, and New York's *Destinations*, published for in print and online for charter motorcoach tour planners and operators.

Online travel information has also grown in large amounts in the past several years. This has led to demand for new and updated travel features by both freelancers and staff writers. Much of the growth has taken place on the Web. Not only are there destination sites hosted by travel-based businesses (e.g., hotels, resorts, airlines, rental car companies, and restaurants), chambers of commerce, attractions, and other organizations and commercial enterprises, but there are also travel reference materials, maps, listings, and other information provided by online travel publications. Some traditional print publications produce online Web sites to meet the interests of travelers in their region. For example, the *Knoxville News–Sentinel* in Tennessee provides a free Web site (https://gosmokies.knoxnews.com) offering an interactive "social network for fans of the Great Smoky Mountains" with information and user discussions about the busiest national park in America, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, which is located near Knoxville.

Consumers turn to both online news media and print news media for help in making travel planning decisions. A major purchase, such as a vacation package, requires the traveler to gain the expertise to make the proper decisions. Airline deregulation has made a quagmire of airline routes, service, and ticket prices. Ground travel is no different. Unpredictable weather and often wildly fluctuating gasoline prices constantly affect automobile travelers, for example. Thus, a good travel feature can make a difference as readers turn to their favorite newspapers, magazines, newsletters, or online publications for assistance. Travel writing, then, can include an element of consumer reporting.

The late Alan Prince, who worked as journalism professor and as a *Miami Herald* travel editor, said writers must be honest with readers:

> The reader who is stimulated by a travel writer's destination piece doesn't return home with a computer or a television set. Instead, he or she's got an airline ticket stub, photographs, and souvenirs, and, most of all, memories. That's not a lot considering today's cost of travel. The reader should understand that he is paying money for an experience, not for an appliance. Henry David Thoreau wrote, 'It is not worthwhile to go around the world to count the cats in Zanzibar'. Both the travel writer and the traveler must understand that.
>
> For some 5,000 years of recorded history, the only way humankind could travel faster than on a horse was to fall out of a tree. And most people stayed close to home. Today, people travel to distant areas in a matter of a few hours—and that means the travel writer faces a credibility standard. The thousands who have visited a place before the travel writer gets there set the standard. The travel writer must realize that in his or her mass audience there are many readers who know more about the place than the travel writer can learn in a brief visit. There's no way the writer can pull the wool over these readers' eyes. He can't fake it and keep his credibility. It's that simple. The other share of your audience—those who haven't been there—might someday go. And if they find the destination to be quite different from what the travel writer has pictured, they will never again believe—or will always be skeptical of—anything that the travel writer ever writes. It's a matter of trust.
>
> Travel writers, especially those who are on newspaper staffs, don't have the luxury of spending weeks in a destination. Two to four days are more likely, and that's hardly enough time to get to know the place—especially when you're supposed to be an expert when you leave.
>
> There's no question in my mind that the most important element in competent travel writing is 'knowing the place' before you get there. You can accomplish this by reading anything and everything you can get your hands on. A reporter doesn't begin an interview with a celebrity by asking how the celebrity spells his or her name. The reporter already knows that and, one hopes, a lot more. The same principle applies to doing a destination piece. Otherwise, the destination piece is going to be awfully 'thin,' and that just isn't good travel writing.
>
> (Personal communication to author, October 6, 2008)

Even the short-distance or regional traveler needs information to use his or her time and resources in the best manner. Travel writing serves this purpose when done well. Business travelers need guidance on all aspects of their travel (including airlines; ground transportation; hotels, motels, and inns; restaurants; and entertainment), and an entire industry catering to business travelers has evolved in the past century. Included in that movement is a subdivision of the travel publication industry that produces magazines and newsletters aimed at veteran travelers.

Simply writing about your recent vacation will not get the job done. Most travel-oriented publications provide a standard fare of information for the traveler, or the person thinking of traveling, or the person simply daydreaming about traveling one day.

Travel Writing and Travel Journalism

Jane Wooldridge continues her discussion of the differences in travel journalism and travel writing with several illustrations.

> Travel journalism can be tips (how to pick a travel agent, five questions to ask before you book a tour). It can be investigative and cautionary, say a story about travel scams or why you do (or don't) need travel insurance. It can be recommendations about great places to stay or eat, or strategies for using Internet booking sites effectively and efficiently. What it must be is news-you-can-use that is based on fair, objective reporting and smart, critical (not necessarily negative) questions posed to a variety of qualified and knowledgeable sources.
>
> It often involves a lot of legwork as well. I once visited 80 hotels in Paris over a five-day period to select a dozen I thought were good value for the price. My feet were killing me … but readers loved the report. Full, fair reporting might be rarer than you think. Say you personally think a theme-park vacation costs a ridiculous amount of money, and that families would be better served by taking that $5,000 to $10,000 and doing a budget trip to Europe or Asia.
>
> You go to theme parks and interview people about whether they think the high price of tickets is worth it. The vast majority of people you talk with say yes, they've had a great time, they saved for two years or will be paying off debt for two years, but it was worth it to them. But that doesn't fit your thesis. So, in an effort to show the other side, *your* side, you ask them questions like, but don't you think your kids would be better educated if you took that money and went to Europe? Or don't you think the price of a hotdog in the theme parks is ridiculous? Or you push at them to say that, well, they really couldn't afford the trip and that they might be putting their future in jeopardy by taking on the debt. Then you write a story that says that families on theme-park vacations admit the cost might jeopardize their kids' future. You've imposed your view in a way that might be true in detail but isn't true in terms of the essence of what the majority of families you interviewed truly felt. What you've done may be strictly accurate … but it isn't strictly true or honest.
>
> You might just as easily have erred on the opposite side of the issue. You might have enormously fond memories of your own family vacations at the theme parks, and you might gloss over it when family after family tells you the price has simply gotten too high, and they don't feel the cost is worth it. So, Rule One is to be honest about your own views and remove them as much as possible both from the questions you ask and the way you ask them. Your goal is to find out how *other* qualified sources (in this case, people who are actually spending the money on theme-park vacations) think and feel.

Here's another example of how you can short-change your readers by letting your personal views color your reporting. Say you only really like backpacking and what you consider 'authentic' travel, and you think rich people who stay in posh hotels are missing the point. So, you write unfavorable stories about upscale experiences. Or you only like nice hotels, so you write negative stories about budget and mid-market travel experiences like cruises. Any way you cut it, you've let your own likes and dislikes change the story. More than that, you've sneered at the people you're supposed to be serving. Even if you don't like cruises, apparently 12-plus million Americans per year do like them. So, what business do you have telling them they're missing out on *real* travel? You don't. Your job is to report on, and – if you've got the professional experience to back it up – evaluate a travel experience for people who DO like that kind of thing. How does a mid-priced weekend cruise on one line compare with a similar cruise on another line? That's a legit comparison.

And let's talk a minute about experience and comparisons. Even pure travel journalism often slides over the edge of reporting into criticism. This is an area where you need to monitor yourself closely. If you don't genuinely have the experience to evaluate a certain type of travel, then don't. Stick with pure reporting … let other people tell the story. Here's an example: I got a story/review of a famous historic hotel that had been renovated. The writers raved about how it was now one of the finest in the world. I had been to that very hotel a few months before, and while I thought the renovation had produced a beautiful lodging, I wouldn't rate it as one of the world's best. I've stayed and/or visited enough luxury hotels to be able to say that … but I wasn't sure the writers who had submitted this story had. This left two possibilities: They had stayed at the hotel for free and were swayed, even unwittingly, by that circumstance. Or they simply hadn't had enough experience with luxury travel to have a wide frame of reference. So I asked them about their experience in that category, and also whether their trip had been complimentary or subsidized.

Which brings us to the subject of subsidized travel. The unfortunate reality is that travel can be extremely expensive, and many publications don't cover travel expenses for freelance – sometimes even for staff – writers. Their freelance fees rarely if ever cover the retail cost of a trip, much less allow for the writer to make some profit. As a result, many honest and proficient travel writers do take free or subsidized trips. In a perfect world, a publication wouldn't take any stories resulting from free or subsidized trips.

But for the reasons outlined above, that isn't always practical. For a writer, it's important to know the policies of the publications you are pitching or writing for, and to follow them strictly. Some publications don't care. Some allow media rates but only within specified guidelines. Some will look at stories resulting from free or subsidized trips but require full disclosure. Some insist that writers have NEVER taken any free or subsidized travel.

Above all, be honest with the publication. And be honest with yourself. Are you skewing the story, even unconsciously, to be nice to these people who have paid

for your trip, bought you wine or shared your dinner? Have you glossed over a problem that would have bothered you if you'd be paying? Or on the opposite end of the scale, have you focused negative attention because you weren't catered to and pampered by the supplier (and yes, I've seen this happen).

It all goes back to remembering that you're a representative for a typical traveler who likes a particular type of experience. That's why my own first choice is to travel incognito. My readers can't go on press trips, don't get special tastings by name chefs or upgrades to suites. Basing an evaluation on such special treatment isn't fair to them. Sometimes I write voyeuristic travel stories that are more for dreamers than for true travelers – then those 'special' experiences fit. But then I'm engaged in travel writing – not necessarily travel journalism.

Travel writing involves taking the reader along on a trip with you, letting them see, hear, smell, and taste the trip just as you do it. It involves anecdotes and a judiciously sprinkling of detail – just as you might season a dish. It is storytelling, with clearly defined characters involved in a beginning, a crescendo, an apex, a denouement (which in publication writing is called a kicker.) Travel writing is the art practiced by Tim Cahill and Elliott Hester, Don George, and Pico Iyer, to name a few. You'll find it on World Hum and in *Outside* magazine and the annual compendium of *The Best American Travel Writing* (though this, too, has biases about what publications it draws from.)

Here's what travel writing is not: It is not an essay about what you did on your summer vacation. And it is not self-indulgent. Too much travel writing has become navel-gazing: One person's witty but nonetheless narcissistic view of a single experience – especially if he or she has engineered or skewed in a certain way (and this does happen.) Even if your story is more a form of entertainment than journalism, it needs to be factual, accurate, fair, and informative. The narrator – the traveler – is a surrogate for the reader, and after reading the story, the reader should be able to ascertain clearly whether this is an experience he'd love to have, or one he'd want to avoid at all costs.

Travel storytelling is no longer just about written words. It's about photo galleries and video stories and yes, blogs. Regardless of the format, the rules above pertain: It's not about you, dude. It's about the reader.

There's another kind of travel writing/journalism called advertorial. Advertorial is content that is designed to serve an advertiser. Some of it is quite legit, providing only an atmosphere that is conducive to advertisers in a certain category, such as cruising and tour operators. Some of it is back-scratching, promised by a publisher in trade for advertising dollars. In either case, the publication may want you to avoid any negative comments about the advertiser. This isn't journalism, but it can be a way to make a living. Whether you're comfortable writing it is up to you. Just be sure the assigning editor is clear with you about the nature and expectations of the assignment.

The media explosion and the shift to multi-media mean that travel writing and journalism, too, are changing. This is a good news, bad news deal. On the one

hand, travel writers and storytellers can tell their stories in many different ways, and in many different places. On the downside, with so many different media companies at play now, many are struggling to make their businesses work. Without driving you nuts with a primer on revenues and business models, suffice it to say that making a living as a travel journalist or storyteller is getting harder and harder.

Newspapers are tightening up, and even though they're publishing more and more on the Web, they aren't able to pay as much or as often for stories. Magazines come and go, Web publications come and go, TV programs come and go. A few publications are doing well … but their needs are only so great. The result is fewer opportunities as travel staff writers, slimmer budgets for freelance travel stories. The next few years, at least, will continue to be a time of huge shifts, and finding paying work with reputable publications is going to be hard, she added.

Your best bet shot is to develop superior skills – as a reporter, writer, photographer, blogger, or vlogger – and focus in on an area that others haven't. Students often e-mail me and say there's never been a column written by a student traveling around Europe and/or Asia and/or Latin America. Soooooo not true (though a publication might be interested in a blog from a local student doing so.) But here's a need that I finally filled after years of trying: A bar column. For eons I'd tried to find someone who could write for me a column on hot bar scenes in various places around the world, from ACC sports bars to organic sips in San Francisco. At a writers' conference, I ran into a young writer named Jenny Adams who was writing for trade magazines devoted to spirits and wine. She was willing to work for a modest fee, and willing to learn how to write in the style we needed. As a result, her column now runs six times a year in our newspaper, and it has given her an opening in other publications.

That brings me to the subject of reliability. Jenny is absolutely, perfectly reliable – accurate, thorough, on-time. Freelancers who aren't get quickly discarded – and worse, the word gets around. I've had staff writers elsewhere in our newspaper who promise stories on deadline and show up so late that we almost miss press time. We ban them. I once had a student blogger—call her Sara—who begged me to carry her travel blog, then promised to post at least three times a week – and then simply didn't. She posted an "excuse" saying she hadn't blogged in two weeks because she couldn't get access. I knew the part of the world in which she was traveling; her excuse was bogus. Sara was lazy, and rather than give up time in a bar or with friends to hit the Internet café for a half hour, she just blew it off. I sent Sara an e-mail reminding her that she had committed to posting regularly and that when she knew she was going to be out of touch, she should tell readers so in advance. Otherwise, I'd have to take her blog off our home page and stop promoting it in print. She never even responded. About six months later, Sara applied for a job; the editor at that publication was a friend and called to ask about my experience with this young woman. Disney was right: It's a small world.

(Personal communication to author, September 16, 2008)

Leading Travel Publications

The *Los Angeles Times, Houston Chronicle,* and *Boston Globe* were honored for best newspaper travel sections of 2020 and 2021 in the annual SATW, or The Society of American Travel Writers Foundation (http://www.satwf.org/) Lowell Thomas Travel Journalism Competition (Society of American Travel Writers Foundation, 2022). For newspaper travel coverage, *The Plain Dealer* in Cleveland, *The New York Times, The Boston Globe*, and the *StarTribune* in Minneapolis were honored for excellence. The newspaper sections were honored for their current information, original columns each week, feature packages, travel consumer news, local travel news, their tips that travelers use to keep informed. *Travel & Leisure, Condè Nast Traveler, Afar, and Southbound* were named the nation's best travel magazines and *Outside, Midwest Living, National Parks,* and *Yankee* won honors for best travel coverage in general magazines. The most outstanding travel journalism Web sites were CNTraveler.com, Frommers.com, BBC.com, and WanderWithWonder.com. And the leading travel journalists of the year? Katherine LaGrave, digital features editor for *Afar*, Alex Pulaski, an Oregon freelance writer, Margie Goldsmith, a New York City freelance writer, and Sarah Khan, a Massachusetts freelance writer.

Readers of travel stories are generally erudite. These persons are those in the higher income brackets with the money and time to spend going places. Numerous research studies have established this. Thus, many of them are likely to be well-traveled and informed readers of your work. And, as some travel editors will tell you, the writing must simultaneously serve two distinct audiences: people who have not been to the place you write about and people who have already been there.

Christopher Baker, an award-winning full-time travel writer, travel book author, and photographer who specializes in adventure motorcycling travel stories, has published work in most of the nation's major travel magazines. He described what makes a travel story a winner, saying it is informative and entertaining.

> A successful travel article does more than conjure up unforgettable images and lead readers by the hand. It entertains, provides reliable and useful information, and tells the truth. But if you fail to place your reader vicariously on that mountaintop or on that beach you've described, you will not sell your article in this highly competitive market.
>
> (Baker, 1989, p. 22)

How can you succeed? What do you write about? You write about places to visit. You tell readers about historical places, annual festivals, national parks, cities, resorts, and inns. You tell them about places to stay, restaurants with views, and the easiest and cheapest ways to get there. You convey the richness, the color, the excitement, the fun, the moods, and the atmosphere. You give important information such as admission prices and times for an attraction. But you also relate personal experiences, such as the best place to park in a busy neighborhood – New Orleans' French Quarter or Boston's North End, for example – to make your story complete.

Thus, you must identify the unusual, the unique, the odd, and the entertaining. For readers, explains Professor Shirley Biagi.

"Visiting Waikiki may have been fascinating for you, but asking a travel editor to buy 6,000 words about 'gorgeous white sand beaches' is an insult. The successful travel writer chooses the offbeat, photographs the unusual, visits the out-of-the-way" (Biagi, 1981, p. 24).

Baker adds that the unusual is essential, but writers must also "breathe possibility into your readers' own travel plans—and make your destinations come alive." (Baker, 1989, p. 22).

The late Curtis Casewit (1988), a Colorado author of 12 books on travel, recreation, and photography, believed travel writing requires enthusiasm to succeed. He is right: This is something you must want to do to do it well. Some people travel because they must; others do it because they love it.

"You cannot enjoy being on the road without a genuine enthusiasm. For some of us, travel is almost a physical necessity. It springs from a chronic curiosity and desire to uproot ourselves," he said (Casewit, 1988, p. 6). He also observed that the most successful travel writers have finely developed skills and traits involving observation, accuracy, humor, flexibility, patience, curiosity, and the ability to overcome adversity.

Developing Story Ideas

Have you ever taken a major trip? Have you ever gone that one step further by writing about it? What would you tell your friends about the trip? This can be the foundation of a good travel feature. Travel writing requires good reporting because it is much more than going from point A to point B by jet. Most successful writers are experts, too, and know the details of a successful journey from planning to budgeting to itineraries and more.

You need to consider what works for those already in the business. Start out by reading the weekend travel section or page of your local newspaper; also study it. What kinds of stories and photographs are published? Where do they come from? Does the section contain more than basic "destination pieces?" If so, what else? In the stories, what sources do the writers use? What is the writing style? Is it narrative or first person? What supplementary material comes with the stories, photographs, or locator maps?

Whom do you contact and with whom do you work? Travel editors, of course. The individuals who review your work have various responsibilities and titles. Most are called travel editors, but some at daily newspapers are do more than just handle travel content. They are features editors or Weekend editors. At magazines, they are sometimes known as travel department or features editors, depending on the level of specialization of the publication. These are highly educated and well-traveled individuals. They are also experienced journalists who have earned the coveted position they hold. And they often really love their work.

Contemporary Travel Journalism Issues

Travel has emerged in recent years to become major subjects for coverage by magazines and newspapers. Sections and departments have enlarged beyond simple articles on destinations. There are numerous issues facing travel writers and editors in

this decade, not the least being ethics and objectivity. Often there are ethical issues related to travel journalism and travel writing to be discussed and debated.

The primary ethics issue relates to what is called subsidized or sponsored travel, mentioned briefly by Jane Wooldridge, *Miami Herald* director of Journalism Sustainability and Partnerships and former Travel Editor, earlier. This means finding sources other than the newspaper or writer to pay for the sometimes-high expenses for domestic and international travel. Often, travel writers accept free hotel space, complimentary airfare, and free meals while touring an area. But the expenses are paid by interests represented by those areas, such as the resorts, tourism commissions, chambers of commerce, national or regional airlines, restaurants, and other groups with a financial interest in the area. They usually expect feature stories that provide instant credibility and positive publicity instead of advertising.

Many publications will not accept articles based on subsidized or sponsored travel. It would violate the news organization's professional code of ethics section on independence. A travel writer cannot offer independent work if he or she is funded or subsidized by the people about which he or she writes. Although larger newspapers and magazines can afford to pay for their staff writers or freelance writers to travel, this has been cut back in recent years by shrinking budgets. Many smaller publications and most freelance writers cannot do this and also expect to earn a living. And some publications do not reimburse sufficiently for the cost of travel to prepare a feature.

The travel writing field, both editors and their freelancers and staff writers, is divided over the "freebie" issue and no simple solution seems readily available, but an increasing number of publications seem to lean toward disclosure of any subsidy of any form; that is, revealing to readers who paid for trips that are the focus of articles.

Although the issue of subsidies is a major topic, so is whether travel writers should take an objective or more subjective approach to their work. Both schools of thought have their supporters. Some editors feel travel writing should be as objectively presented as any other news or features in the newspaper or magazine. Others, however, prefer a more subjective personal experience approach with the hope that it will be more appealing to readers.

Finding the Best Storytelling Style

The experienced traveler-turned-writer is the travel writer of today. Your job as a travel writer is to take the reader on destination stories, to give your reader the best advice and information in service stories, and to provide opinion about current travel and tourism industry issues.

Most travel writing is narrative. It remains descriptive, however, as writers use their command of the language to paint a mental picture for the reader. Remember, not all travel stories are illustrated with color photographs or graphics, so you must use your vocabulary to convey impressions through precise adverbs and adjectives.

Travel writers often utilize a more personalized style of writing. Although most features are written in an objective, third-person style, travel writing allows several different writing styles, including a first-person, personal experience approach. The personal view places the author in the story as a principal source of information and experiences. It is first-hand experience writing. It is friendly and casual. Use of the

first-person pronoun "I" is characteristic of this style. It is storytelling just as if you were telling it to your friends.

Your own observations and reactions are important in this approach. Re-creation of dialogue using direct quotations of brief conversations is common also. Although first person is not as common in other sections or departments, it is a favorite in today's travel writing that makes the story more appealing to readers. It is helpful to study the newspaper or magazine first to determine what writing styles it prefers for what types of travel articles. Simply go to the Web site to see what sorts of travel stories are published.

A simple, but successful, formula for travel stories begins with a dramatic or, at the least, interest-arousing lead. You must sell the story to the reader. There are plenty of travel articles out there. The story must convince the reader that yours is worth his or her time. Many writers do this with an anecdotal lead, others use a dramatic moment, some use heavily descriptive openings to create impressive images in the reader's mind, and others use a summary approach that simply creates an atmosphere or mood of the place.

Examples of quality travel journalism are easy to find. Most printed stories are also published online today, and many can be found in online archives. Pick up the Sunday edition of your local metropolitan newspaper and a handful of popular general audience and travel magazines. Travel and other monthly magazine subscriptions are even available for just a few frequent flier miles from your air travel.

Common Travel Story Approaches

In general, there are six types of travel features today:

- *Destination stories* – Destination stories simply tell readers the basics about places they might go on a trip. What's there? What is there to do? What sorts of accommodations are available? A destination might be Key West or the Grand Canyon National Park.
- *Attraction stories* – Attraction stories are more specific than destination articles. These tell readers about a particular place, such as a park or historical site. An attraction is the Ernest Hemingway House or the Duval Street bar scene in Key West.
- *Service stories* – The service story explains how to travel better by letting the reader understand the mechanics of traveling and the latest developments in the travel industry. This includes articles about finding airline tickets using frequent flier miles, taking safe and healthy cruises during the pandemic, or negotiating customs, immigration, and public health hurdles in a country known for its tight rules and rigorous screening.
- *Personal experience stories* – Personal experience stories may do the same as any of the three previous approaches, but they interject a personal experience perspective from the writer and perhaps individuals traveling with the writer. These include such things as your emotional responses to the experiences, your favorite parts of a destination, and your individual experience in an activity such as ziplining over a tropical forest or bungee jumping from high bridges. As personal features, these stories have high levels of anecdotal content.

- *Travel list stories* – These stories offer a listing of items related to an activity or place for readers. These stories offer a somewhat brief, maybe a few hundred words, introduction that sets context and explains the list, if needed. Lists are common in most publications that offer travel content. Stories might be top ten beaches in Florida, best state and national parks in Canada, most authentic Italian food in Boston's North End, the most rugged luggage on the market, or a dozen things not to forget for international trips.
- *Roundup stories* – These stories give readers a summary view of a subject by theme. The writer researches and assembles information from different places and summarizes them in listed or other organized formats. For example, stories could focus on summaries of airline policies involving unaccompanied children, in-cabin pets, or luggage fees. Or another example might be a summary of the latest travel deals offered by travel agencies and airlines for an upcoming holiday period. At times, these round-up can be multi-author, compiled from different sources such as press releases, different staff and freelance writers, and news services.

Writing the Travel Story

The single-most important step in writing a good travel story is preparation. Although taking the trip and writing the story may seem important, these steps cannot be as successful without laying groundwork before taking to the road. The biggest reporting assets writers have in travel journalism are the telephone and the Web. Use them often. They can offer the basis for a good story and save you a lot of time and trouble in the long run. Do not forget e-mail as well. When you need information, go on the Web and search for transportation, housing, dining, destination, and attraction information, such as press kits. Much will depend on the type of story you plan to write.

It is also helpful to get your name and address on e-mail distribution lists of public relations firms that represent parts of the travel industry that interest you. You will soon have more information than you need. Bookmark Web sites. Organize them into a folder. Set up social media to assist with reporting the assignment. On Twitter, for example, follow hashtags related to your interests. An example might be national parks in the Western United States. Or river cruises in Europe. You get the idea. The same can be done with organization and group pages on Facebook, Instagram, and other social sites.

If you plan to get into travel writing, either for magazines, newspapers, or Web travel sites, start a set of digital reference files. Organize them as you see fit but try to put information you collect in some system so it can be found quickly when needed. One easy approach is to begin a file scheme based on destinations and attractions. You could also begin a set of files about service-related topics that is organized by subject. Keep a source file on Outlook or some other digital app that includes names, titles, telephone numbers, e-mail addresses, and Web addresses, too.

To get you thinking about what goes into reporting and writing a travel story, here are some suggestions for a good start:

- *Search social media and the Web* – Almost all tourist destinations and attractions, such as cities and regions, and other travel-oriented places, will have a significant presence on social media platforms and elsewhere on the Web. There are plenty of organizations geared to travel on social media and the Web as

well. In short, there are tens of thousands of travel-oriented social media and Web sites. Find these sites that relate to your story idea and read through them before getting on the telephone or going anywhere. The sites may contain a lot of commercial hype but can also offer useful basic information such as contacts, maps, hours of operation, directions, and prices. You can use them for booking rooms, transportation, and even dinner reservations.

- *Read online travel blogs* – For more than a decade people have put their travel experiences into online diaries and journals called travel blogs. They are free and easy to find and most offer useful content. They can be personal or commercial. For example, daily newspaper travel sections and national magazines often have travel blogs on their Web sites. These blogs can chronicle the travels of staff writers and editors, but often also link to other blogs of local travelers on adventures of interest to readers. These blogs can provide useful information such as travel tips, but also offer personal views of travel.
- *Call or e-mail sources ahead of time* – When you decide to work on a story and after you have done your online homework, call or e-mail sources at the locations you plan to visit a week or two in advance to gather advance information. Call or e-mail tourism offices that are often government-sponsored. The best possible help on foreign sources are the on-site offices of government travel bureaus.
- *Contact local business organizations* – These include chambers of commerce and tourism-convention bureaus. These organizations can provide economic reports to give you a better feel for the area. They can also give you the best information about hotels, motels, restaurants, and transportation. Often, they also have information about historical sites, popular places to visit, and more. The best approach is to call or e-mail these organizations.
- *Use visitors' bureaus services* – Popular vacation and resort communities will have sophisticated visitor and tourism offices and will be eager to help you before your trip. These persons can also arrange activities once you arrive.
- *Use resources at your hotel* – Do not forget the hotel or motel where you plan to stay. At higher-end hotels, resorts, and motels, concierges can be very helpful. The management of these places will offer help in advance if you request it.
- *Go to the library and your local bookstores* – Check out travel and other relevant books about the areas you will visit at the campus or public library. Or visit a nearby bookstore and just browse through them in the store if the budget is low. Review articles from magazines that have been recently published so you can get a better idea of what might be a "new" angle for your story.
- *Build your own travel library* – As you go to a new place, add a travel book or guide about it. For example, Lonely Planet's large collection of city, country, and region guidebooks, supported with updates online and available for tablets and smartphones, are popular with many travelers. Visit the travel section of a good local bookstore or search at your favorite online bookseller Web site and you will find a wide range of travel guides – most written by experienced travel guides and travel editors. There are also a growing number of travel-oriented newsletters available through online subscription. These vary a great deal in their approach, content, and price but can be valued up-to-date sources of hard-to-find information.
- *Contact specific site sources* – Once you know where you are going and when, start to ask specific questions when you send e-mail or call. Contact the

individual locations you will visit and request background information. But always remember the wide range of possible sources that you have at your disposal. A good travel writer, like any reporter, has multiple types of sources and is always adding new ones.

- *Use diverse sources* – Many useful and reliable sources serve the travel industry. These sources are individuals working for hotels, airlines, car rental agencies, cruise lines, automobile clubs, and specific attractions. Many are in public service, such as city and county tourism offices, state tourism offices, and regional agencies. Many are in private service, representing businesses such as local and state chambers of commerce, tourism cooperatives, and promotional organizations. Seek a representative list of sources for your story, including different groups of people.
- *Call or e-mail to confirm appointments and visit dates* – Your time is valuable during a trip, but so is the time of the person who might be your source or tour guide. But to help your work, you must be reliable and honor appointments.

Boston freelance travel writer Barbara Claire Kasselmann said she talks to local residents for color and other details when she visits a destination for a travel story. She says these sources also provide local lore and tips on the best places to eat or tour that might be off the beaten path. She explained:

> I always talk to the people in a region to get the flavor of their accents, their interests, and their styles that make that part of the country or the world special. If you make these people come alive in your writing, it will pique the prospective traveler's interest in the destination about which you will be writing.
>
> (Kasselmann, 1992, p. 21)

Many tourism offices are set up to deal with drop-in visitors such as journalists. Others are not, so consider the source and determine if the people you need to see will be able to see you at a moment's notice, or if these people need a call ahead of time. It never hurts to call or e-mail ahead. Use these tools to your advantage.

Use Observational Skills

After your research is under control, after all the appointments are made, and, after you arrive, your onsite reporting begins. Remember, your senses will be serving as the senses for your readers when the time comes to write the story. Good observational skills are critical, and these are developed through discipline and practice. A successful travel writer always has an eye or ear open for new possibilities. Plan, but take advantage of opportunities than come along. There are stories that you do not expect that will develop, forcing you to abandon part of or the entire original plan. If you are fortunate, you could encounter a new angle on a story that you planned to write. This will not only be exciting, but it will also excite readers of your story. You must constantly look at the story with the idea there is something new to this approach.

A good observer will use his or her senses to the fullest and convey the results to the reader. Consider colors and sights, sounds, and smells. Notice textures and try different

tastes. All of these, if written with the right adjectives and adverbs, will take the reader to a special place. Veteran *Washington Post* travel writer Louisa Peat O'Neil has written freelance travel features for major magazines in addition to her own newspaper. O'Neil argues that the best tool of a travel writer is a journal kept during a trip.

> Whether you call it a diary, log, notebook or journal, the written record of immediate impressions is the travel writer's most valuable tool. Sentences and phrases reported as they happen or a few hours later are vigorous with the energy of the experience, full of fresh detail. With his or her senses alert to surroundings, the observant writer jots down colors, sounds, smells, word sketches of people and scenes. At this notebook stage, the writer's eye is like a magpie collecting elements that shine, cramming the journal page with description, she explained.
> (O'Neil, 1996, p. 30)

O'Neil uses a small spiral notebook. However, writers can use a wide range of devices – such as pocketsize notepads, hand-held digital recorders, tablets, and even laptop computers. To keep a journal is to be a highly disciplined traveler. However, professional travel writers develop this discipline because their livelihood often depends on it. The point is to record the reactions and observations while the memories and moment are still fresh with all the rich detail you want in your story when you write it days or even weeks later.

Avoid clichés in travel stories. Most editors detest them, and they can be the kiss of death for an otherwise sound manuscript. But there is temptation to use them to convey impressions. Work a bit harder to find the words you need to describe what you saw, heard, or felt. It will pay off. Similar advice can be offered about perpetuating stereotypes. This is especially a problem when you are writing about foreign countries and their cultures and peoples. It is also worth reminding you that ethnic and racial diversity in source selection will build a stronger story.

Strive to find fresh and innovative ways to describe the areas you visit and to choose the anecdotes you include. It is quite possible to write about national or regional customs, beliefs, and other traditions without feeding on stereotypes. It might require some work, but it will pay off in the form of more appealing travel features.

Advice from a Travel Writer

South Florida journalist Lesley Abravanel spends some of her time writing about celebrities, but she also works on writing travel books and features. She is a former cruise magazine editor and writer. She has traveled most of Florida as author of *Frommer's South Florida* and *Florida* guidebooks. She recommended taking a fresh approach to any sort of travel assignment.

> As the former managing editor of *Porthole Cruise Magazine*, an international Time-Warner distribut.ed consumer newsstand and subscription publication dedicated to cruise travel, I was faced with the responsibility of making sure that writers I hired did not subscribe to the 'What I did on my summer vacation' school of travel writing. And while it's not easy to make countless cruise ship

> articles sound innovative or interesting, it was necessary to hone in on one or two particularly interesting aspects of each trip. The quirkier, the better.
>
> No one wants to read about the hackneyed midnight buffet—unless, of course, there was a rather risqué ice sculpture, a fight between two hungry passengers over the last piece of Baked Alaska, or, perhaps, a chef who happened to sing karaoke songs while serving the food. The point is that, when it comes to travel writing, you need to bring the reader onto that trip with you. With a careful combination of facts, local color and amusing anecdotes, a travel article can be a whole lot more than a mere brochure. People can get brochures for free. If they are paying to read your article, you better be sure that you're giving them their money's worth.

Abravanel also noted that writers should view destination stories with the same attitude.

> As far as destination pieces are concerned, the same holds true. No one wants to read about how 'the people on the island are friendly and accommodating.' Tell us what provoked you to make that assessment. Did a local islander give you some of his homemade sunscreen after you suffered a serious burn? Did you happen to talk to any locals who've lived there their entire lives and explained the evolution of the destination from a sleepy spot to a hot spot? Did your cab driver happen to drive Madonna to the Ritz Carlton, but insisted he stop to show her the 'real' city? Stories about how you spent hours lounging at the hotel's lovely, lima bean shaped pool are Dull with a capital D. We do like the description of the pool as lima-bean shaped, however.

Abravanel offered two additional suggestions for a travel story:

> Always avoid clichés. 'The sunset was breathtaking.' 'The view from the balcony was awe-inspiring.' We want to know why you think so. Capture your observations with color and innovation. Depending on what your travel assignment is, it's best to avoid the tourist traps. Explore – after all, you are a reporter. Discover some hidden gem. Try to discover an undiscovered spot – a small restaurant off the beaten path, a hotel you can only get to by foot or donkey or whatever, a local dive bar in which barflies can tell you the best place in town to get a hamburger. It's all about exploring. When working on the Frommer guides, I take my own advice. While it is absolutely a must that I cover the Sea Worlds and the Disney Worlds and all those touristy mouse traps, I try to give an offbeat description to make it all sound interesting. Beyond writing about the obvious, I tend to focus on the less obvious, such as an unassuming rib shack, a makeshift tiki hut on the edge of Biscayne Bay serving dollar beers and chunks of smoked fish (and no utensils either!), or a hotel whose exercise equipment is smattered throughout the hallways with a rooftop patio lined with waterbeds.
>
> A good quote from a proprietor or even someone who has been to these places always helps illustrate your point, too. In guidebooks, however, space is tight, so use your discretion when it comes to quotes. The bottom line when it comes to travel

writing is *to show, not tell*. Examples, anecdotes, and a keen eye for the unusual will almost guarantee that your article will not resemble a travel brochure.

(Personal communication to author, October 1, 2002)

Best Sources for Travel Features

We need a variety of sources for travel stories. The sources on these lists are important because of the organizations and information that they represent. Others are going to be important because of the positions these individuals hold within an important travel-oriented organization. The best advice is to use them often because they will be there to help before, during, and after your trip (when you are writing about it).

Public Sources	*Private Sources*
Neighborhood tourism offices	Specific tourism attractions
City, county tourism offices	Hotel, motel offices
Multiple area tourism boards	Development boards
State tourism departments	Airline travel desks
Parks, recreation offices	Airline public relations offices
Public relations firms that serve governments	Chambers of Commerce Business associations
Local corporations	Tourism boards
National tourism offices	Hotel, motel associations
Travel, tourism Web sites	Attraction Web sites
Travel and tourism social media sites	Travel-oriented blogs
Attractions, destinations on social media	Attractions, destinations on social media
Travel-oriented Web sites	Restaurant associations

Writing Destination-Attraction Stories

One of the oldest, and still the most common, forms of travel writing are the destination and attraction pieces. These types of stories are designed to focus on a location or a specific place that readers might want to visit or have already visited. It is generally a descriptive story with people included. The story is designed to tell your reader about the place, whether it is an exotic location such as Bangkok, New Delhi, or Singapore, a more traditional vacation destination such as Niagara Falls or the Smoky Mountains, or specific attractions such as The Louvre in Paris or Neuschwanstein Castle in Germany's Bavaria.

These stories focus on broadly defined destinations and more specific attractions. The stories we write in these categories usually take one or the other approach, but not both. They must be crammed with facts. The reader is seeking the best information about these locations as possible destinations for a meeting, vacation, or other purpose. Tell the reader what he or she should see. Tell what should be avoided and why. Tell your reader

about the major parks and other public facilities. List the historic sites. Give details of hours of service, costs, and other necessary information. Where does the reader write for additional information? You should know this and should tell the reader.

Destination and attraction stories should be rich in detail and offer direct quotations from local authorities to back up generalizations about places of which you have written. Quote residents and experts. Talk to historians and visit historic sites. Talk to food critics about the best restaurants. Ask other travelers to comment about the same things you experience. Then summarize the most important facts in a special abstracted form known as the facts box. This helps your reader by providing a fast-reference list while he or she is in the car or plane. An interesting and unusual place is often the subject of a strong destination feature.

Popular Travel Books and Periodicals (Also Online)

Hotel & Travel Index
Official Hotel and Travel Guide
AAA guidebooks
Arthur Frommer's guides
Lonely Planet guides
Fodor's guides
Travel Research Bibliography
Rick Steves travel guides
Air Traveler's Handbook
Goode's World Atlas
The Travel Writer's Handbook
Southern Living
AAA magazines such as
Home & Away or *Going Places*
National Geographic
Signature
InsideFlyer
Afar
Dorling Kindersley guides
Conde Nast Traveler
Official Airline Guide
Travel & Leisure
Endless Vacation
Best American Travel Writing series
Don George's *Travel Writing*
Travel Smart

Destination-Attraction Story Fact "Boxes"

A popular approach to writing destination or attraction features is to include an "if you go" text box within, or at the end of, the story. This information goes beyond what is contained in the main story and should not duplicate it, but also supplements the article with an abstract of key information for your reader who skims the section or who is interested in clipping only the most basic information about this destination. What do you include? The typical categories of information for the box include:

- *Directions* – How do you get there? What is the address? How do local visitors get there by car, train, boat, bus, or air?
- *Parking* – Where do you park? What is the cost? When does the lot open and close?
- *Days and hours of operation* – When are the attractions and accompanying facilities open?

- *General information* – Whom does a visitor contact for general information, such as advance tickets or brochures? Admission fees? Reservations?
- *Online address* – Include a Web site address, social media addresses, and similar links.
- *Contact* – What is the contact telephone number and address?
- *Lodging* – Where can readers stay and what are the price ranges?
- *Food and other facilities* – Can you buy food? Can you find restaurants there? What are the price ranges? What other facilities (or the unusual lack of them) are worth mentioning to your reader?
- *Souvenirs* – Can you buy anything? Is taking anything (e.g., at a national or state park) illegal?
- *Tours* – Are there organized, regular tours? How do you sign up or reserve space?
- *Special upcoming events* – What's in store for the current or next season?

Writing Service Travel Stories

One of the most practical types of travel features is the service story. These pieces provide useful and important information to help readers make decisions about an upcoming trip or what to do with their time while on the trip. Service features help readers be better informed and travel better. Service stories also provide another important function because these stories, short or long, offer tips and ideas for simplifying the trip and the means for making the trip. For example, a travel service story helps your readers negotiate a busy major international airport – such as Atlanta's Hartsfield, Chicago's O'Hare, or London's Heathrow – by offering descriptions of the terminal, concourses, parking, other fees, luggage storage, security policies, and anything new. In fact, these stories should emphasize changes in policies, new facilities, and anything else new.

These stories tell your readers when and how to book reservations on cruises or at that popular area resort by providing information such as names and addresses, deposit amounts, and deadlines. Service stories also give tips on getting good camera angles when photographing sites such as national parks or historic neighborhoods and their buildings. Tell readers about changes in airline food service, for example. These stories are dependent on experts in the businesses about which we write, so an airline food story would require talking to chefs and others involved for the airline, the policymakers at the airline, industry consultants who are independent of the airline, flight attendants who serve it, and the frequent fliers who consume it.

For a story explaining how to negotiate a foreign city's complicated public transportation system, you must know the destination and its underground rail or on-ground system inside and out. These stories are strongest when they draw on the experience of the travel writer who has been there as well as experts who run them or design such systems. This means you must get out on the road as often as possible to write these types of stories.

It is not impossible, however, for you to write strong service stories from where you work. Telephoning or video conferencing to the right industry sources makes a big difference on these types of stories.

Service stories require good timing to be valuable to your readers. If you want to write the type of story that readers print/clip and save – sometimes these are called refrigerator stories because people attach them to their refrigerators or put them on office bulletin boards – you must produce the story with sufficient advance timing to get it to the reader before or when it is needed. Usually this requires months for

magazines and weeks for newspapers. Service stories do not always follow this more conventional approach. A successful service travel story for online sites, or in a newspaper or magazine, does not even have to be in traditional story form.

Travel sections and departments provide important travel information in lists, tables, charts, and boxes that stand-alone (without a story). It is often the responsibility of travel writers to gather the information for those who compile it or turn it into a visual element such as an infographic.

For an effective service article, you must know your traveling readers' information needs. This takes research and a thorough knowledge the reader of your specific market. A writer who does not know the market will not have his or her stories read if they are published, and they will not get published very often.

Service features most frequently take the form of one-shot feature stories. These stories are designed to stand alone, but there are other forms. Some travel editors and writers produce columns that are functional with service-type information to help consumers make those big decisions about vacations and business trips. And there is the opportunity on certain service subjects to develop a series. What are some ideas? How about highway safety and auto maintenance in preparing the family car before a long trip?

Leading Travel Industry Sources

Human Sources	*Written Sources*
Local editors, reporters	Tour books (annuals)
Tourism directors, staff	Local authors' books
Hotel staff where you stay	Local newspapers' files
Public information officers	National, regional travel magazines
Managers of attractions	Auto association guides
Residents	Attraction press kits
Tour guides	Local historians, history books
Hotel, motel room guest books	Travel blogs
Shop merchants	Local authors and writers
Taxi and bus drivers	Social media pages, news feeds
	Local museum directors
	Online maps, map apps
	Web travel sites

Service Content about Travel Online

Service content is also important for online news publications. CNN.com, for example, is one online news publication that places high value on travel service articles. In the travel section of the CNN Web site, which has international audiences, editors have compiled an archive of articles that can be helpful to travelers. Similarly, *The New York Times* has searchable travel story content under Travel on its Web site. It is more common that you may think, and these great reference sites are easy to access. Take a look around to see what you may find.

One of the advantages of travel journalism found online is its seemingly unlimited capacity for multimedia content. Whether it be on social media or a more traditional Web site, travel journalists can offer their stories, still photographs, slide shows with or without audio narration, information graphics, interactive maps, original video, blogs, interactivity through reader comments, relevant lists, and other larger amounts of reference content such as databases that are not publishable in the traditional manner. As the Web develops, more and more options for content will emerge.

Since more and more people are using social media as their news sources, it is essential to seek travel content on major social media platforms. Branded news organizations have found it is an effective way to reach additional readers, promote their best work, and even attract potential subscribers.

There are numerous travel-oriented Web sites. Some of the most outstanding sites have familiar brand names that originated in print form, such as major daily newspapers and national and international magazines. In addition to CNN.com, travel television networks such as the Travel Channel, National Geographic Channel, Food Network, Discovery Channel, and the History Channel offer online travel content also.

Furthermore, much service content can be found in blogs. Travel blogs are quite personal and often are repositories for an individual's travel experiences, but some are written by experts such as travel industry employees, current and former regulators and investigators, lawyers, frequent travelers, travel agents, and retired individuals with extensive experience in the travel business.

Outstanding travel stories, photographs, and multimedia content can be found all over the Web but start at branded news media locations such as the online travel sections of *The New York Times, The Washington Post,* Cleveland *Plain Dealer, USA Today, Boston Globe,* Minneapolis *StarTribune, Wall Street Journal*, and *Los Angeles Times*.

Writing Travel Stories for Magazines

In the past decade, there has been a boom in the national and regional travel magazine market in the United States. *Travel & Leisure*, one of the oldest, began in 1937 and has used its current name since 1971. *Condè Nast Traveler* was founded by Condè Nast Publications, its first such publication, in 1987. *Afar*, based in San Francisco, began publishing in 2009. While some travel magazines have closed recently, others have launched. Many existing travel magazines retooled or even moved their primary presence online to reduce production expenses.

Look at any freelance writing market book (such as *Writer's Digest's* annual *Writer's Market* or the annual *The Writer's Handbook*) and you will get a good idea of what magazines want from freelance travel writers. Most magazines maintain very small in-house staff of full-time writers and seek interesting and talented freelance travel writers.

With the additional space often afforded to major features by consumer travel magazines, writers can be more eloquent in their writing about the destinations or services on which their articles focus. These articles often have a storytelling quality to them or are much more descriptive and detailed.

Backpacker magazine, which focuses on wilderness experiences such as outdoors travel, hiking, and climbing, uses a large volume of service content in each monthly

issue. Founded in 1973 and based in Colorado, it publishes skills articles on fitness, first aid, food, animals and plants, camping, climbing, and hiking. The magazine also uses numerous articles about outdoors destinations and personal experiences in the wilderness, but it places a premium on how-to information related to travel to and during the outdoors experience.

Content creation publishing companies produce most airline magazines, and these contractor companies often need freelance contributions from serious writers. Many have transitioned to online only and have dropped the familiar print editions found in seat-backs. Online editions are accessible through smartphones, tablets, and laptops often carried by travelers and can be accessed at no charge even in the air. Despite these changes, airline in-flight magazines remain a solid market for travel writers. Often overlooked, especially at the international level, these niche publications need destination and service articles for their readers. Most airline magazines are monthlies, but some of the smaller airlines have less frequent titles. These publications usually run major features in front, regular departments in the back, perhaps some columns mixed in, and some listings of events, in-flight programming, safety matters, or other useful information.

For travel writers, airline magazines are an opportunity to write major features and shorter pieces for the regular departments. Major feature articles need to be tuned to cities and people served by the airlines, of course, and the major activities within those areas. Articles typically highlight upcoming events in destination cities, the best restaurants, sightseeing, recreation, and entertainment, profiles, lifestyle concerns of travelers such as business executives, new technology, and vacation ideas. Specialized columns can cover a wide range of topics but are often written by regularly contributing experts on such subjects as finance and money, business and management, personal health and fitness, sports, and living or lifestyles. Regular departments focus on information about the airline itself, safety features on board the airplanes, movies, and music available on the flight, games, quizzes, and puzzles, and other diversions.

To write for travel magazines and newsletters, you must know the precise informational needs of the specific market. Study these travel magazines before you begin to write for them. Each one is a little different in what it likes to publish. Know their unique style of writing and presentation. Know the approaches. Magazines are tough markets, but if you can meet the needs of editors, you will have a widely read article by an upscale audience.

Travel Columns as Features

Travel columns are permanent fixtures in many newspapers and travel-oriented magazines. Many are written as feature stories. These columns are given a wide variety of titles. The question-and-answer format is a popular format. These columns typically answer questions posed by readers and are either answered by experts or by staff writers. Columns and features come in wide varieties of other presentation formats, such as single author, multiple authors, or just staff credit. Many are written in a simple narrative style. Some publications run edited travel columns that list no credited author. Some are weekly and some are monthly. Most run from 600 to 800 words, but some are longer, 1,000 to 1,500 words per article.

Smaller publications often depend on syndicated material and wire services for their travel columns or material that makes up an edited travel column. Magazines

usually depend on freelance writers, many of them experts, to provide material on a regular basis and editors pay by the item. Syndicated travel columnists cover a variety of subjects. Popular topics for specialized travel columns include outdoor recreation, cruising, international travel, business travel, bargain and money-saving travel, and solo or senior citizen travel. Travel columns can also be used as a collecting point for shorter items that come to your attention as a writer but might not make a publishable story on their own merit. Calendar information – such as upcoming events, hours of operation, and free information by mail – fits neatly into a column format.

Travel columns are features, with the writer taking advantage of the regular space and appearance date (weekly or monthly, for example). In this format, writers such as editors present their personal perspectives on travel subjects. Many columnists choose the personal approach because of their extensive backgrounds. Writers can express opinions, reactions, interpretations, and generally comment on current travel industry developments.

A Travel Editor's Perspective

Jane Wooldridge
Senior Director for Journalism Sustainability and Partnerships, *Miami Herald*

> My job as travel editor at the *Miami Herald* is part brand manager, art director, interdepartmental coordinator, strategic planner, budget-and-staff manager, new product developer, new business initiator, travel expert, public speaker, multi-media specialist, production manager in print and online. In my spare time I write, photograph, blog and appear on TV and radio and webcasts. When time permits, I also travel.
>
> Not what you thought, huh? Not every travel editor position is this varied, though many are.
>
> Here's what all this means: My first responsibility is deciding what goes in the Sunday Travel section and what goes on our web page, which can be updated several times in a single day. I'm responsible for finding and choosing stories, art, and multi-media files including video, audio, and slideshows. I work with freelancers in advance of their writing a story to be sure we're clear on what that story should say, and I edit the story when it comes in. (This sometimes means re-writing; if it means too much rewriting then the freelancer probably won't be writing for us again.)
>
> I also come up with ideas about how we can make the information we gather and create more accessible to our current and potential audience. This might mean a new magazine with content aimed at a different audience than the one we now serve, or a free giveaway that repackages stories that have already run in the newspaper. It might mean creating an online channel devoted to cruising and Florida stories, or an interactive consumer travel expo where travelers check out the seats from various airlines and race other show-goers to see who can get the most into a standard-size rollaboard suitcase.

To make any of those initiatives work, I need to be part business maven. I need to understand revenue streams and advertising trends, though I don't get involved with any matters that might cross ethical lines (like skewing content to cater to specific advertisers).

Above all, I'm the face of the *Miami Herald's* travel editorial coverage on all platforms: In print, online, on my blog, at special events. I speak frequently at industry conferences about trends both in travel and media. It's my job to see that when people in my community think about travel, they think about the *Miami Herald*.

It's also my job to juggle all these tasks against limited resources. I allocate our freelance and travel monies in the ways that I think will best serve our readers, and I do the same thing with my time—which often runs 60 hours per week, and no, I don't make overtime pay. Once I also made those decisions for staffers who reported to me, but as resources have dwindled, I'm mostly a one-person show.

People ask often how we decide what to cover. The answer is a fairly complex matrix involving target audiences, news events and resources. But in essence, it always comes to this: What we run should serve our readers and their interests. That means we focus on subjects of greatest interest to South Floridians. And we look for stories and information they might not readily find elsewhere. That means stories about regional travel – in our case, that would be Latin America, Caribbean, and Florida – and special interests like cruises. And we focus on timely information that they might not find in a magazine, like special deals that might expire quickly.

Oh yeah, at the best of times I get to travel, photograph, and write. Whether I'm traveling or not, I blog nearly every day.

What do I like best? I like the fact that my job has many parts, and that when I get tired of doing one thing, I can just switch to another; there are always a ton of things to do. But what I like best, probably, is travel. It is truly my passion. And it doesn't really matter what kind of travel: From backpacking to luxury, I do it all. In fact, some of my best experiences and best stories have come from trips that I would never have taken in my personal life.

But don't make a mistake: This isn't my personal life. Reporting trips mean long days – often from 6 a.m. to midnight. I'm often alone. My time is not my own; while on a personal trip I might spend an afternoon sipping beer or taking a nap, when I'm working, I need to keep moving. And I have to be sure I talk with other people and get quotes … something that is often harder than you'd think. (Whether I use only one or two, I need to get LOTS of quotes to be sure I'm not just using words from one person that aren't representative of the typical experience.) I once saw eight museums in an afternoon; I literally dashed from one to another around Buenos Aires. It was interesting … but certainly not something I'd do on vacation!

(Wooldridge, personal communication to author, September 16, 2008)

Writing Quick Trips Stories

Jane Wooldridge
Senior Director for Journalism Sustainability and Partnerships, *Miami Herald*

Quick Trips are stories about destinations that can be visited from South Florida in a couple of days. These stories should evoke ambiance and a sense of why someone would go there. They also should also be extremely useful, with specific recommendations for lodgings, activities, and dining. Quick Trips can be oriented toward a certain audience: the family guide to Key West versus the couples guide to Key West, etc., or be general. Here are the details:

- *Length*: 25–30 inches (750–900 words), plus an if-you-go box.
- *Trip Planner*: This box should help readers to quickly figure out if this trip is for them. It should include the following information:
- *Best for*: Who is this trip best for? History lovers? Nature lovers? Families? Couples? Gay couples?
- *Also good for*: Secondary groups
- *Cost for a two-night visit in (qualify the type) of accommodations:* Think typical accommodations here; if this is a place known for its historic accommodations, price it for the historic accommodations. Include what someone might reasonably spend on meals, etc. Again, think type: We might say that a budget weekend in this place costs $250 for two people; weekend in historic accommodations with visits to fine restaurants costs $600.
- *Getting there:* Drive time, or fly time, from South Florida. If flying is involved, tell us who goes there ("several major airlines" will do fine if that is the case, but don't forget discount airlines such as Southwest, JetBlue, Spirit.)
- *Information:* Contact info for the destination; be sure to include Web address.
- *Lodging recommendations:* All Quick Trips must include a box with recommendations for lodgings that the writer has actually visited. 3–5 lodgings should be included; they should include budget, moderate, and luxury options. Brief descriptions of the hotels, address, phone, website, plus rates.
- *Dining recommendations:* 3–5 restaurants, preferably a range of prices. Again, brief descriptions plus address, phone, website if they have one, cost (either the price of an average dinner for one, without alcohol, or the price range of entrees).

These items are optional for the box:

- *Highlights:* Just list the things someone shouldn't miss; include more detail on them in your story. Maybe contact info for a museum, marina with boat rides, etc.
- *Special events:* Any major festivals, with dates; website for info, if there is one (Wooldridge, 2008).

Chapter 16

Service Features

South China Morning Post news intern Julianna Barcela was studying journalism and politics at the University of Hong Kong in 2022. During her summer break, she wrote health and fitness, entertainment, and art features while working for the English-language daily based in Hong Kong. One story helped readers with their well-being, especially those unable to get away for a vacation. Her story offered mindful ways to take care of yourself and to relieve stress caused by remaining at home and work. With a two-paragraph introduction, she tells readers her advice for self-care through five suggestions, set apart with subheadings. She began her story with a simple idea, take a walk:

> *With coronavirus-related restrictions loosened after Hong Kong's fifth wave of infections peaked, many people are searching for ways to practise self-care and relieve stress.*
>
> *Here are five ways to help you return to wellness in the coming weeks.*
>
> ***Take a mindful walk to discover hidden gems***
>
> *A free Mindful Walk City Guide map is available from Lululemon shops in Hong Kong, as part of the athletic apparel company's "Be You Be Well" initiative. The guide was created with ZtoryTeller, a creative arts platform, and illustrated by Sheung, a hearing-impaired Hong Kong artist.*
>
> *The map features several restaurants, historic sites and natural landscapes around the Central and Sheung Wan districts on Hong Kong Island. Participants are invited to take a mindful walk and connect with their inner self. …*
>
> (Barcela, 2022)

Barcela's story is an example of how publications around the world offer service feature content to their readers. It is out there, but maybe you didn't know what it was called. And you may know that many magazines that have strong service components. These include *Family Circle, Allure, Woman's Day, Ladies' Home Journal, Good Housekeeping, Prevention, and Better Homes and Gardens*, to name a few in the U.S. Although those are geared to women, some men's publications are service oriented also. *Popular Mechanics, Men's Fitness,* and *Men's Health* are leading examples. Many city and regional magazines offer strong service content each month.

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The stories and other content help readers to make better decisions as consumers, to take better care of themselves, to improve relationships, to make things, and cope with "realities of everyday life, and not matters of cataclysmic importance," said Pamela Fiori (1992), an editor, a writer, and authority on luxury travel and lifestyles. She is a former long-time editor of *Town & Country* magazine, the nation's oldest continually published general interest magazine.

> Service magazines are more apt to be micro than macro; local as opposed to global; practical and directional; a bit flat-footed at the minimum and bordering on gimmicky when they try too hard. But at their best, they can have tremendous impact: They can change the way readers think or act, alter the way they spend time or money, influence style, eating habits, and travel plans, improve relationships, diminish biases.
>
> (Fiori, 1992, p. 78)

Newspapers run service content in large amounts as well. And it is common on Web sites. In newspapers, much of it is found in special sections, particularly in weekend editions. These include food, cooking, and drink, home design, home repair, gardening and landscaping, apartment and condo living, technology and new media, and fashion. Online, service content can be found on Web sites devoted to particular subjects and those branded by traditional print news media and broadcast news media.

Many feature stories are written to provide this type of service to readers. They do not have to be a service to all readers all the time. Many are specialized topics that interest a segment of readers. City and regional magazines often fill their pages with service content. These magazines appeal to readers with their restaurant, club, movie, and theater listings, entertainment-oriented calendars, and sports and concert schedules. Another important service area has become real estate. City and regional magazines such as *New York* magazine devote space to finding apartments and apartment living. A recent issue of *Chicago* magazine focused on the "Best of the New Chicago" and told readers about people, places, foods, and finds connected to reopening of the city during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. *Chicago* writers Robert Reed and Shane Tritsch checked out employment and jobs in the middle of the 2007–2009 "Great Recession." The magazine offered some companies that were hiring and doing well. This is how they began the piece:

> *Whether we're in a recession or still teetering on the brink of one, you don't need a degree in the dismal science to see that the times are dismal. Tumbling home values, credit markets in crisis, skyrocketing food and energy prices, and the occasional investment-bank meltdown are just some of the troubles jolting the U.S. economy. Now the pain is leaching into the workplace, where pink (as in slips) is the year's hot new color—the economy lost 260,000 jobs in the first four months of 2008—and gloom the prevailing mood.*
>
> *Undaunted, we went in search of local employers who are defying the economic odds and positioning themselves to emerge even stronger once this downturn ends. While many companies are tightening belts, laying off workers, and*

hanging on for dear life (see "It's the Stupid Economy"), a wide range of local workplaces—from global corporations to mom-and-pop outfits to not-for-profit organizations—are not just surviving but thriving and even hiring. We found a drugstore titan filling the prescriptions of aging boomers (a growth business indeed); a downstate heavy equipment maker riding the global boom in commodities and industrialization; and two restaurant chains easing the strain on consumer wallets with tasty and affordable food. There's even a bank that emerged relatively unscathed from the credit crisis.

To make it onto our list, organizations had to have sound financial performance or backing, an appetite for expansion, an ability to hire new workers, and a reputation for a supportive work environment. A few names on our list may even prove to be shrewd holdings for long-term investors. Surviving hard times is not easy. But it can be done, and the workplaces we dug up are proving it.

(Reed & Tritsch, 2008, n.p.)

Service journalism, such as *Chicago* magazine's cover story on jobs and employment, has been around for a long time. The earliest efforts were published in the traditional women's publications such as *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping*, first developed more than 100 years ago. Much of their content was service-oriented information about homelife. These articles are not necessarily "spot news" in the sense that we usually talk about news.

Online publications have quickly come to use these types of articles as well. This is especially true of online publications that maintain theme Web sites or specializations. Service feature articles are an important part of any publication and readers depend on these stories as part of the total content package. These stories help readers do something better; they help make life simpler and easier.

Service stories often take four basic forms: how-to-do-it features, listings, the art of living articles, and case histories. Of them, how-to-do-it features are the most common form, but many publications love to run listings of all types also:

- *The how-to story* explains how something is made, built, cooked, protected, purchased, or otherwise accomplished by an expert on the subject. The general idea is that the reader can do it as well. These stories are often found in home and garden sections, fashion, food and cooking sections, and lifestyle and living sections. How-to stories are the most frequently written forms of service stories. They are certainly a popular story form with editors.
- *Listings* have become more interesting in recent years online, but also remain useful in newspapers and magazines. Sports sections of newspapers and sports-oriented magazines offer lists of team records and interesting trivia as regular features. Business- and finance-oriented publications frequently run lists of top businesses, securities, top salaries of executives, and recent real estate transactions. Feature sections of online newspapers and city and regional magazines have, for many years, listed in calendar form the major events of an upcoming weekend or month and have listed top restaurants and theaters in their circulation areas.

- *Art-of-living* stories teach us how to get more out of life. These can be inspirational stories, with readers feeling uplifted after reading about someone else's skill at making his or her life better. Sometimes these stories (and books) are called self-help stories and are simply narratives or essays that affect readers in one way or another and give them ideas about how to improve their lives or the lives of family members or friends. These stories include subjects such as health and wellness, retirement, love, raising children, relationships, and making tough life decisions.
- *Case histories* teach us about something by looking at a particular person or family example in depth. Readers are served by the lesson learned from the story. These can include descriptions of purchasing or selling a house, caring for a medical problem, or resolving a conflict.

The four approaches are not limited to single stories. There are entire magazines and Web sites that specialize in "how-to" journalism. Books, too, have been written on hundreds of subjects to help readers in the same way – everything from career choices, résumé writing, and job hunting to personal finance, automobile repair, and relationships.

Approaches to Writing Service Stories

Magazine editor Pamela Fiori (1992) said service magazines and stories "help the reader to cope—with aging parents or one's aging self, an alcoholic coworker, a serious illness, unemployment, change of address or change of life. They might even inspire a reader to contribute to society—by volunteering his or her services, by writing to Congress, by joining a local environmental group. Or, closer to home, by spending more time with the kids." (p. 79)

How do these stories achieve these seemingly lofty goals? Although the service article seems self-explanatory, there is more to it than the description indicates. The best service stories provide information, which result in action or behavior change on the part of readers. Often the information gleaned is the sole reason for a reader's use of the article. By providing information, you are offering readers the best advice you can find on the subject. This is done in a readable fashion, but at the same time in the clearest way possible because you are explaining how something works or how something is done.

Service stories take one or more of these three fundamental perspectives:

- *Writer-as-expert* – Individuals who are experts on a subject write how-to stories. As writers, they can communicate their expertise directly to persons who want to know about the subject. You can often write as an expert from your own personal experiences, thus combining the best elements of a personal experience feature with a service how-to feature. Eugenie McGuire is a freelance multimedia programmer and freelance writer based near San Diego. She specializes in writing about horses and other agricultural animals and produces a large amount of how-to-feature material based on her own expertise and experience. "I personally

find that if I haven't done it, I cannot write effectively about it," McGuire said. "For me the practice of actions is a requirement to get the words on paper correctly. My articles start out as blow-by-blow descriptions of the action, almost as if I was looking at a movie of the thing and describing it to someone who was blind." The articles get refined from that point but still retain the first-person feel. For the publications that she has written for, such as *Southern California Riding Magazine* and *The Hoofprint*, McGuire believes this works well. But she cautioned, "I'm not sure this would be suitable for more mainstream features." (Personal communication to author, January 19, 1998)

- *Someone-else-as-expert* – This is the more common approach to how-to service stories. This approach requires you as the writer to find one or more experts on a topic and relate in detail to readers how he or she does the activity. Finding these experts is relatively easy – there are hundreds of them in your own community at colleges and universities, government offices, and in private businesses. You can find experts by searching online experts directories (e.g., https://www.experts.com) also. In this type of service story, your task is equal to that of the writer-as-expert approach by which you must take the approach of the expert and tell readers how he or she does it. Many times, these stories are primarily for enjoyment and not necessarily to be used by the reader to improve his or her lifestyle.
- *Writer as source or generator of visual content* – As the primary organizer for a service story content, a writer has the responsibility to gather information for the creation of lists, boxes, short sidebars, informational graphics such as "exploded diagrams," calendars, recipes, step-by-step instructions, and so forth. Writers rarely put these in final form for publication – there are digital visual creators for that – but editors depend on writers to produce the raw information either on the writer's authority or on the authority of expert sources.

Choosing the Best Service Subjects

Possibly because there are so many subjects and sources available for how-to, lists, and other service stories, some experts feel how-to stories are one of the easiest ways to break into feature writing. Writers Clay Schoenfeld and Karen Diegmueller (1982) made that point when discussing service features. Subjects that readers want to learn about tend to make the best service stories. These are day-to-day "how-to-live better" subjects of a rather routine and practical nature. These include subjects on personal health care, fashion, car and home repair and care, home and office decoration, gardening, food preparation, money and finance, shopping, and a variety of arts and crafts subjects. Readers often depend on their hometown newspapers and favorite magazines for advice on living better. Editor Pamela Fiori (1992) said "readers want intelligent choices and solid judgments delivered in a compelling way" (p. 80).

Minneapolis writer Steve Perlstein believes how-to articles are important forms of service features that should be mastered by all feature writers:

> There are few better ways to sell a piece to a magazine than to offer a title and topic like '10 Ways to Get Your Kids to Eat Their Veggies' or 'How to Make a Killing on Health Care Stocks.' Editors love this stuff. These ideas can come from virtually any slice of life you run across. The ideas I get for *Parenting*—things like

> microwaving baby food and how to know what to believe in newspaper nutrition stories—come from real questions my wife and I have asked ourselves. This way, I can find out the answer and make a lot of money at the same time. I'm writing a how-to book that guides parents through work–family options like family leave, job sharing, telecommuting, compressed workweeks, and part-time scheduling,
>
> The project stemmed from when I took family leave when our son was born. We wanted to learn more about how to go about taking such a leave, but nobody had written anything; that's where I came in. The old adage goes, 'write what you know.' With how-to stories that can be adapted to go, 'write what you want to know,' because somebody else is probably wondering the same thing.
>
> (Personal communication to author, January 15, 1998)

Service story writers should also be concerned about their own attention span in dealing with a subject. For service features, pick subjects about which you have interest and that matter to you. This makes your efforts much less difficult when you must spend a large amount of time learning about the subject.

What are hot service topics? If you are a good researcher, use your skills to compile current but unusual idea lists. How-to stories can include a variety of topics beyond the usual home and garden ideas, such as how to maintain your e-vehicle, how to save money on your streaming services, or methods for improving mileage when gas prices are at their highest in years. Include timely and socially or financially important topics such as how to manage the health of children in the pandemic, how to survive the extreme ups and downs of a volatile stock market, cautious investments in crypto-currency, and finding full-time work-at-home employment during the wild fluctuations of the job market.

If you are not an expert in such complex stories as AIDS and securities, then you must locate authorities on the subjects to help you do the stories. A problem with these stories is simple enough: some experts make a living from their expert advice, and they might be reluctant to share it with a newspaper or magazine writer. A counterargument is publicity. Some reluctant sources may respond if you remind them that publicity can help them build their businesses.

You may need to go to several local or national authorities on the same subject to put together your story. *Writer's Digest* contributor Art Spikol said his best advice for how-to writers is to pick the right subject. "The secret of success is to identify a need that isn't being sufficiently filled, and to fill it. In other words, take on a job that nobody else wants."

This is the case for service articles, he said. "If you weigh the time you must put into them against the money you earn from them, you must strain to reach the poverty level. That's the bad news. It's also the good news, because that's one of the reasons that nobody else wants to do them" (Spikol, 1984. p. 15).

Spikol (1984) also said service stories should do legwork for readers. You become the reader's helper. If you can select subjects that do this, you will have a successful service article. "[T]hey sell magazines. They're staples, often staff-written, at many publications. Especially today, when special-interest publications abound" (p. 15). To get assignments from your ideas, Spikol recommended pitching editors with a few ideas

before investing time and money. This way, if an editor likes an idea but wants a slightly different focus or different sources, you can make the changes early in your work.

Writing Authoritatively

Texas novelist and short story writer William Browning Spencer said that all writers – fiction and nonfiction – need to use the voice of authority. Using authority results in "the impression the author gives that he is in control of his material" (Spencer, 1992, p. 28). This, Spencer said, can be achieved in several ways, but getting the facts right, of course, is the most basic of all.

When you have firsthand expertise in a subject, it is easy to speak with authority. Because you experienced it, you know it. For example, a journalism student at the University of Miami combined her interest in magazine feature writing with a special interest in exercise to write a profile about a Pittsburgh woman who started her own successful health club. College journalism students can use a second major or a minor to create a specialization for their service writing. Regardless of how you obtain it, your expertise should dominate the service article. Without conscious effort, it might become difficult for you to write for readers who do not know the subject as well as you do.

When you know the ins-and-outs of a subject, you know the detail and precision needed for such service writing. But when you do not have expertise or if you are just starting out, then you must be able to give your stories a sense of authoritativeness by depending on sources.

New York writer Gary Stern, author of how-to books, said you can accomplish the same type of firsthand authoritativeness in your writing even if you go to other sources for your how-to article. Stern argued that for freelance writers, "the art of instant expertise is a must" (Stern, 1993, p. 35).

Writer Lawrence McGill said:

> Two traits are essential: Curiosity. A willingness to use your inquisitive pick and shovel to unearth information that makes you sound authoritative. I've recently sold articles on how to order clothing from Hong Kong, how to combine various sports in an exercise program, and how to cut the cost of shaving. Before researching these subjects, I knew about as much about them as I do about building submarines. Nothing.
>
> (McGill, 1984, p. 26)

McGill also recommended that you seek four types of information when doing research:

- Specific descriptions
- Subject-bound terminology
- Concrete examples
- Expert facts

As Stern and McGill each note that experts talk shop by using specifics. They just do not generalize. For example, if you are writing about bicycles, you do not just talk only bicycles. There are racing road bikes, BMX, road bicycles, recumbent bicycles,

cruisers, tandems, children's bicycles, and e-bikes. Then you can begin talking about frames, gearing, brake systems, rims, tires, and hubs. Take this specific description, combined with correct technical language used by the bicycle industry (terms such as freewheel, derailleur, crankset, or head tube angle), and you can write with the authority of a veteran. Current examples make these terms come to life – discussing whether to get a particular brand's front or rear derailleur on a sport or touring bicycle begins to make sense to readers when applications are made (e.g., a specific brand of bicycle). Facts, such as the number of new products on the market or prices, make the story practical and useful.

Gary Stern's secret to instant authoritativeness is logical and simple: "There are always experts who can answer your questions and lead you to new sources" (Stern, 1993, p. 36). The trick is finding the experts, right? Stern recommended these 12 ways to become an instant expert:

- Brainstorm for sources
- Find an "angel" or mentor to help you find other sources
- Let one expert source lead you to another
- Be wary of self-serving experts
- Use clip files
- Ask your editor for suggestions
- Use trade and professional publications
- Find a dissenting view
- Use think tanks and their experts who are paid to study subjects such as the one about which you are writing
- Use reference experts at the local library
- Consult public relations directors and public affairs coordinators of companies and organizations
- Keep a list of experts for future reference but be wary of "rounding up the usual experts"

Multiple sources make a difference in service journalism. When you are writing authoritatively about something that you know little about, you must consult as many different sources as possible. The wide variety and diversity give you insurance against conflicting information and advice. McGill (1984) advised against the overuse of the pronoun "you" in how-to articles. Most editors complain about this, he said. Do not rely on it and use it in a limited fashion. McGill warned of two additional concerns:

- Make certain you are not presenting opinion instead of facts. Multiple sources help filter out opinions.
- Present the facts and instructions as yours, not someone else's. A number of interviews with different sources lead you to certain conclusions of your own and make this easier to do. You can become authoritative on your own in this way.

Dr. Carin Smith is a retired Washington state veterinarian who loves to write. The consultant, trainer, and speaker has authored numerous books and written hundreds of freelance articles, including *FlexVet, Career Choices for Veterinarians,* and *101 Training Tips for Your Cat*. She is a writer who loves animals and veterinary

medicine. But she is an expert who uses her high level of specialized knowledge as a basis for her award-winning books and magazine features.

"I'm a veterinarian/writer who has been fairly successful selling my how-to articles on a freelance basis," Smith said. "I write business articles for veterinarians and pet health articles for pet and horse owners."

Smith, former a consultant, speaker, contributing editor to *Horse Illustrated* and *Cat Lovers* magazine, and author of numerous magazine articles about animal health care, does a large amount of how-to writing:

> My best-selling articles are those that answer the questions that I hear everyday. These are the 'average' questions, the ones that appear simple on the surface. For instance, an article on flea control will sell much better than one on fancy new methods of brain surgery in dogs. You don't have to pick an obscure or complicated or highly technical subject. To any potential writer, I'd say: Think of what you know the most about—whether it be plumbing or gardening or computing,
>
> Then consider the typical conversations you have with friends or coworkers. What questions are you asked most often? About what kinds of things do people ask you for your advice or turn to you for answers? Why are you the one they ask? If you aren't the one, then what do you need to do to increase your knowledge in that area so that you know more than just about anyone you talk to? Once you are in that position, you know enough to write an excellent how-to article. Assume your readers are very intelligent, but that they know absolutely nothing about your field. That way you avoid talking down to the reader, but you still don't go over their heads with words they don't understand. Explain every technical word but learn to do so without making a big deal out of it, so the reader isn't offended if he or she already happens to know what the word means.
>
> (Personal communication to author, January 25, 1998)

Writers for specialized publications involving subjects such as animal science and medicine or computer science and computers must know their subject matter when writing on their own authority. In these approaches, writers do not need to go to experts and quote their views and summarize their opinions and recommendations. Their advanced knowledge must be right, or readers may make mistakes that are costly in several ways.

Similarly, high-level food and nutrition expertise was required for a *Bon Appetit* magazine article about teaching children to enjoy and eat vegetables. General-interest non-fiction author Mark Kurlansky discussed the age-old American problem of kids not eating their vegetables. He brought his own expertise to the story as author of books about food and food ingredients. In fact, he even touted it in his lead. Kurlansky tells readers how he found the answer in a culture halfway around the world where eating vegetables is not only normal, but highly desirable – in China. This is how Kurlansky (2008) began the story:

> *When I was researching my book about salt, I had the good fortune to meet up with Zhenzhong Guo, a professor of salt history at Peking University. One day while having lunch with this charming, aging scholar, the conversation wandered to the new McDonald's restaurants in the capital. With shy embarrassment he*

confessed that he once went there for a meal. I asked him what he thought of it, and he shook his head and simply said, "No vegetables."

The professor and many millions of other Chinese do not eat vegetables because they are healthy. They eat them because it is unimaginable to have a meal, including breakfast, without vegetables. The Chinese do not cajole their children to eat their vegetables. A meal without vegetables would be a sad deprivation.

Of course, China is changing rapidly, and if Beijing families start raising their families on American fast food, they will have the same problem that Americans do. One of those is that children don't want to eat vegetables. The worst possible response to this problem is now becoming a food fad …

(Kurlansky, 2008, p. 76)

Ten Tips for Service Feature Boxes

Pamela Fiori (1992) was editor-in-chief of the luxury lifestyles *Town & Country* magazine from 1993 to 2010 and is the former executive vice president and editorial director of American Express Publishing Corporation. Her former magazine, aimed at high-end women readers, expanded its coverage of fashion, style, beauty, health, wealth management, home design, the arts, and philanthropy under her leadership. She launched the quarterly *Town & Country Travel* magazine in 2003 and was responsible for starting the semi-annual *Town & Country Weddings*. Fiori developed this checklist of 10 tips for preparing service items such as lists and boxes:

- *Keep it simple* – Give great information, not great literature
- *Make it lively* – Material should be inviting
- *Be kind to the reader* – Graphics should be legible
- *Display the material prominently* – Don't diminish material by burying it
- *Be accurate* – Fact-check because it is essential. You can't risk losing the trust of readers
- *Avoid giving the reader too much* – Be selective. You can do too much
- *Stick to one style* – Develop and use a standard format for presentation
- *Coordinate with the art department* – They produce the artwork
- *Exercise restraint* – Too much irritates and confuses readers
- *Don't fake it* – There should be a legitimate reason for the box or list

Writing How-to Articles

Perhaps the most common type of service article focuses on how to do something: how to cook a particular dish, how to make a piece of furniture, how to repair a broken appliance, how to edit photos on a smartphone, or how to buy a big-ticket appliance. These are the bread-and-butter stories of service feature writing and a story that feature writers should master early in their careers. Some freelance experts

say the how-to article is freelance writing's biggest single market. If you can write "how-to" articles, then you should also be able to write "what is," "where is," "when is," and "why is" features also. They each have a common element of authority and expertise that makes these stories appealing to readers needing information about a subject. For example, *Golf Digest* magazine recently offered online readers stories in its regular "How To Guides" and Instruction department. These included playing golf on desert courses, what every beginning golfer should know, improving swings, advice on specific shots (drives, approaches, and putts), and player fitness. The presentations included stories, still illustrations, and videos.

In 2022, cities around the world were stricken with heat waves of sometimes record proportions. London, for example, set records with one July day reaching 40.2C (104.4F). Parts of the U.S. from Texas to the Dakotas were overwhelmed with high temperatures. One important service story for readers is to tell them how to combat the heat, especially residents in homes with no air conditioning. *The Washington Post* writers Allyson Chiu, who covers climate solutions, and Sarah Kaplan, who covers climate and human response to a warming world, wrote a story that originally was published in summer 2021 and republished almost one year later, during one stretch of high temperatures:

> *With the U.S. suffering another summer of widespread extreme heat, millions of people are again dealing with blistering temperatures. Experts say it's critical to have a plan for staying cool and safe, especially if you don't have air conditioning.*
>
> *"Air conditioning saves lives in these times of very extreme heat," said Matthew Levy, an associate professor of emergency medicine at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. "Tragically, when we see people who succumb to heat-related illness or severe outcomes, it's usually lack of access to air conditioning." But many homes aren't outfitted with air conditioning, particularly in temperate climates. Meanwhile, people who do have air conditioning may be concerned about skyrocketing utility bills, overloading electrical grids or contributing to human-caused climate change, which is largely the driving force behind the frequency of extreme heat events.*
>
> *If you're trying to safely beat the blazing heat while living in a home without air conditioning, here's what you need to know … .*
>
> (Chiu & Kaplan, 2022)

These articles are not usually the exciting, award-winning forms of journalism you might have aspired to produce when you first became interested in writing nonfiction. However, these are the practical types of articles that help freelancers make a living and help staff writers keep their editors happy. "[F]ew literary reputations have been built upon, and no Pulitzer awarded for, how-to tomes," wrote Colorado full-time freelance writer David Petersen (1992, p. 38).

"I write how-to because freelancing helps pay my bills, and how-tos probably comprise the largest single slice of today's freelance market. Instructional nonfiction is where the assignments are, and where the money is" (1992, p. 38). Petersen, who has written several hundred how-to features during his career, uses a basic formula.

Like most articles any feature writer would outline, his how-to articles have three major parts: the beginning, middle, and end. Each has an important role, as he explained:

> An old journalistic truism—you've no doubt heard it—holds that every article should have a beginning, middle, and an end. Well, in how-to writing, it's more than a truism, it's a mandate. And none of those three distinct parts is more important than the opening hook.

- *Lead* – The "hook" is the first few paragraphs where you get readers interested and entertain them at the same time. This is the portion of the article where the stage is set. The introduction tells what the story accomplishes. It contains a paragraph that is a statement of purpose. It helps the reader so he or she does not have to struggle with your article to figure out what will be gained from reading it. McGill recommended "letting readers know you will teach them something valuable" (McGill, 1984, p. 28). State the benefits of your advice, he said. Tell readers you are going to help them solve a problem if that is the point of your article. At the end of the beginning there should be a transition to the middle of the article.
- *Middle* – Petersen recommended outlining the middle of how-to articles during the writing process to keep them organized. Start with decisions about the main points and purpose. What are you trying to do? How do you accomplish that? Generally, the step-by-step portion of your story follows. Take readers through the process to get to their goal. This is detailed and should leave no guessing. You must be careful to explain all steps with the assumption that your reader does not know certain basic points about the process. McGill said readers expect information in how-to articles in a "cadence" approach. This means writing the instructional portions of the article in a cookbook style. For example, you might write in four quick and short sentences: "collect tools: drill, bits, ruler, pencil, dry wall mount. Measure the location of the picture. Drill hole. Screw mount into wall. Readers expect to receive how-to information in such a cadence," he said (McGill, 1984, p. 28).
- *Closing or ending* – This portion of the article "weaves it all together," Petersen explained. You have previewed, explained, and now you are recapping. Some repetition is important here, especially on the most significant points. The conclusion can also offer a bit of final advice for your readers. These tips might hint at troubleshooting, setup, or maintenance, for example.

Editor Art Spikol urged that you also create a chart to help keep organized when producing service articles. "List everything you want to know about whatever it is you are investigating," he said (Spikol, 1984, p. 16). "In constructing such a chart, you might begin by listing the names, addresses, and phone numbers" of your primary sources, along with other essential information about the sources. In short, a key to success is being organized when gathering facts. This should also benefit you when you begin to write the article itself. Your urge to keep the article brief might

have to be quelled in the interest of clarity in service features. Additional words, used in the right places, might make the difference in a positive direction in this type of feature writing.

A good way to double-check your approach is to write a rough draft and then ask someone who knows absolutely nothing about the subject to read it to see if the article makes sense. This way you spot unclear passages before it goes to your editor. You want to be certain to eliminate ambiguous or vague content that would lead to guessing on the part of readers. Because you are so familiar with the material, it is easy to lose sight of a detail that someone else unfamiliar with the process will easily spot. On the other hand, if you are unfamiliar with the material, you might have the same problem spotting problems with details.

Even after you have checked your article, your publication will also give it a thorough once-over. Many major publications test new food recipes and review other how-to food and drink stories in their own kitchens or in the kitchens of experts. Editors at *Popular Mechanics* check potential how-to stories by building the furniture or equipment or by testing repair hints in labs or workshops before publication.

These are good "training ground" features. Here's an example: A major university's student employment office newsletter recently published a helpful article that focused on controlling stress. Written and edited by undergraduates, the newsletter often uses stories of this type to help student employees cope with life on campus. Another recent article discussed student stress caused by exams, term papers, campus jobs, and various conflicts. The article gave "helpful hints" from experts about coping at the end of a semester.

Columnist Heloise – daughter of the original Heloise – offers an entire column based on helpful hints for housekeeping and home life subjects Heloise is a contributing editor-columnist for *Good Housekeeping* and her long-running national King Features column appears in more than 600 newspapers worldwide. The column is a question-and-answer format feature that solicits questions and suggestions or tips from readers. There are numerous other similar columns written at the local, regional, and national levels that have been popular with readers on all platforms.

A Recipe for How-to Food Writing

Contributed by Nanette Blanchard, a freelance writer and cookbook author

> Root vegetables, recipe software, the history of corn, low-fat ice cream, and vegetarian cookbooks are some of the subjects I've written about as a freelance food writer. Getting paid to test chocolate recipes or try out new restaurants may not seem like writing, but it is. Food writing is one of the most enjoyable and versatile types of freelance writing.
>
> You can get ideas for food articles anywhere and everywhere. Start paying more attention to what people are eating. Listen when friends start talking about a new restaurant. Read cooking magazines and the food section of your newspaper. Even television can help you with ideas for food articles. Check your local television listing for daily food and cooking shows.
>
> Seasonal topics are always in demand by food editors. Because many magazines work six months in advance, keep a calendar near your desk when sending food

article queries to editors. I keep a spiral notebook and write in pertinent information for each month of the year. That way, I can quickly glance through my notebook and find out that blueberries are in season in July or that March is National Peanut Month.

Don't limit your article topics to national holidays that are traditionally associated with food like Christmas or Thanksgiving. *Cooking Light* ran an article on President's Day with recipes inspired by U.S. presidents such as Brown Rice Pilaf with Peanuts (in honor of Jimmy Carter) and Jelly Bean Cookies (in honor of Ronald Reagan). Many magazines run low-calorie and spa food recipes in their January issue for all the after-the-holidays dieters.

I usually come up with some recipe ideas before I query the publication and offer a sample recipe list. I then look through cookbooks and my extensive recipe files for some preparation ideas and ingredient suggestions. I try to use simple, descriptive recipe titles. I often include some type of short introduction with each recipe such as, "This recipe is a family favorite and I adapted it using brown instead of white rice." If your recipe can be prepared in a different manner or prepared ahead, this information should be included in the recipe's preface.

The style of the recipe varies. Many food magazines send recipe guidelines to freelance writers at the time an article is assigned and some of these recipe guidelines are quite complex. Check each magazine you're writing for and follow the recipe style exactly. Some magazines spell out Tablespoon, some just use T. or Tbsp. Always list all ingredients in the order used in the recipe.

I find that including an ingredient's weight as well as number is often helpful. A recipe that includes two potatoes in its list of ingredients is less scientific than one that states two potatoes, about a one-half pound each. Also, include information on how to test for doneness in addition to cooking or baking times. Rather than just stating "Bake about 20 minutes or until done," write "Bake about 20 minutes or until toothpick inserted in center comes out clean."

When testing a recipe for an article, always make it twice. This can help you discover any problems or be certain that the ingredient amounts were correct as written. Save your grocery receipts as the magazines may pay your recipe-testing expenses. The directions of a recipe can be copyrighted although the ingredients can not. If your recipe closely resembles another published recipe, with only a few minor changes, it is always smart to mention the original author and the inspiration for the recipe.

Almost every magazine published today can be queried with a food-related article idea. Don't limit yourself to food magazines. Travel magazines, women's magazines, men's magazines, children's magazines, health magazines, airline magazines, and even romance and confessions magazines all publish food articles.

You can write about the history of wheat for *Smithsonian* magazine, 15 ways to disguise broccoli for your kids in *Parents*, or that wonderful farmer's market in Provence for *Travel & Leisure*. Study several back issues of each magazine you wish to query, and you can narrow down a food or cooking topic for everyone.

Food writing is an always-fascinating field of writing, and you don't have to be a Cordon Bleu chef to get published. With a little study of the food markets and a lot of enthusiasm, anyone with a love of leeks or a yen for yams can be a successful food writer.

(Personal communication to author, February 1, 1998. Reprinted with permission.)

Self-Help Nonfiction That Sells

San Francisco area writer and psychotherapist Eric Maisel (1993) recommended an 11-step self-help program to writing self-help stories and books (and he has written dozens of them):

Getting Ready:

- Identify a workable and compelling issue
- Frame appropriate questions to give focus
- Serve the reader as a mapmaker, not an expert
- Reframe problems as challenges for motivational purposes

Building the Book or Story:

- Decide on the structure of the project in terms of general information, individual stories, and self-help strategies

Writing the Book or Story:

- Provide examples, vignettes, and illustrations
- Use available research
- Create classification schemes to help convey concepts
- Offer workable strategies to readers
- Describe available resources and support services
- Look to the future to tell readers where they can go from here

Using Illustrations

Illustrations, such as arranged or posed photographs, drawings, and charts, make things even clearer for many service features. An editor will usually ask for them when the assignment is initially discussed. Many how-to stories are presented with illustrations to help describe the process, a critical step, or even the final product. Artwork includes tables, charts, maps, diagrams, graphs, "exploded" diagrams in which items are taken apart, screen captures, labeled photographs, and staged photo illustrations.

Charts and tables can provide such information as summaries of steps necessary in a process such as cooking, outlined one at a time. Or they might present a rundown of costs for a repair or renovation project or list different options available in a major purchase. Graphs, maps, and diagrams can show how steps or stages in a process or

procedure tie together. As an expert on the subject, you should work closely with artists to make certain such graphs are correct in every detail.

Photo illustrations can also do the trick. Photographers will pose the subject matter as an illustration to display what needs to be shown. You should tie these in with references in the text of your article. An alternative is to label parts of the photograph through the cutlines/captions or legends under the photographs or to identify parts of the subject of the photograph with identifications using lines or arrows. Collaborating with copy editors, graphic artists, informational graphics editors, photographers, and page designers makes the total story package work better. The tasks of writing and preparing artwork for how-to or other service features often must be team efforts. Most editors and artists appreciate the advice and assistance.

Service Stories and Books

There are countless how-to books on the market, many which have grown out of original newspaper or magazine stories. A quick look at the *Writer's Market* shows a large number and wide variety of publishers involved in producing these specialty books. Recent editions present hundreds of listings of both major and minor publishers who consider how-to manuscripts.

Specifically, another popular magazine and online publication category in recent years has been self-help or self-improvement. The *Writer's Market* also lists publications such as the bimonthly magazine *Psychology Today*. It seeks manuscripts on psychology and self-improvement because it defines itself as a hybrid of science, psychology, and self-help content. Psychology and self-help magazine editors are always searching for good feature stories. The stories most in demand are about mental health topics. Self-help stories often tell how individuals can make their lives better, improve how they look at life, and how to deal with relationships, and better understand people.

Social media pages, Web sites, podcasts, and other digital formats that focus on how-to content are popular these days, with content on personal development subjects (exercise and stress management), sports subjects (golf and tennis), and personal finance (real estate and stock market investments). But readers of these online sites should be careful with social media content that is not edited or otherwise filtered that does not clearly identify its authenticity and accuracy. They can contain false or misleading information.

Creating Lists as Service Features

It is not unusual to find stand-alone lists in magazines, some daily newspapers, and on some online news sites. You can enhance your service feature work by combining the best of the narrative article and a list. The list thus becomes a sidebar or remains a major portion or purpose for the article. These approaches are often given titles such as "10 Richest Women in the State" or "Five Steps to Losing Weight Overnight." Newspapers such as *USA Today* have capitalized on the curiosity aroused in readers by such lists. Sometimes stand-alone and sometimes with a story, these lists often act as a visual feature for readers. Magazines also use lists with regularity. Travel magazines often run lists such as the 10 best amusement parks, 10 ways to save

money on airplane tickets or car rentals, the top business hotels in a city, the best resorts or museums, or the top restaurants.

To be successful at creating listings, you must have a creative energy for research. Lists often require multiple sources found in different locations. At other times, information may be found in one place, such as a government report or database. To provide the service to readers, they must be given the most recent information available from the most authoritative sources. Therefore, your list is also the most accurate. Publications that publish listings are often considered authoritative sources on their own and find their published lists cited and reproduced elsewhere. Here are some examples:

- Rhode Island writer Dara Chadwick (2008) prepared a list-based article for *Shape* magazine, telling readers about six health shortcuts that should have never been taken.
- *First for Women* magazine gave readers a full-page list of safety tips that was compiled from talking with emergency medical services personnel.
- *Family Circle* offered its readers a half-page short list of six ways to save money on family trips.
- *O, The Oprah Magazine*'s Oprah.com Web site published a narrative list-based that told its mostly women readers about 10 types of men that "women should run from." With a single sentence setting up the list, the piece provided the categories with several paragraphs of text describing the tendencies of each type of potential mate.
- *Runner's World* magazine recently published a list of "good eats" for runners, preparing for readers a "healthy, whole-foods eating plan in six courses." The article was more than a list, including recipes, narratives, color photographs, and rules for good eating for athletes.

List information is used in many ways. Readers like to keep them, turning them into "refrigerator features" that are clipped and stuck on the refrigerator door with a magnet or piece of tape. Some lists can become publicity sources for the publication, too. For example, many morning drive-time radio program personalities like to pick unusual listed feature information off a Web site, out of the newspaper or a current magazine to read to their audiences (e.g., best- or worst-dressed lists, and top-attended movies of the past weekend).

Most stand-alone lists are short and to the point. These are usually a top 10 or top 12. Too much information is usually not retained or read in the listed form. Thus, a brief list of the top 10 busiest airports might be appealing, but a top 100 becomes useless and overly thorough unless it is part of a major project or a complete list of all the elements in a group and the detail is necessary. Most published lists are presented in tabular form since tables are quick and easy to read. Paragraphed information of the same kind is just not as easily skimmed and understood.

Art-of-Living Stories

Features that offer self-help or self-improvement content are part of a broader category of service articles called art-of-living stories. These have been made popular by

their regularity in widely read publications such as *Reader's Digest*. Art-of-living stories can be an easy market for beginning feature writers, said the late Philip Barry Osborne (1987), a former *Reader's Digest* assistant managing editor. These stories include features that are inspirational narratives and essays, inspirational essays on faith and religion, and self-help stories. Inspirational and motivational features are also a type of human-interest feature and were discussed earlier in this book.

Inspirational narratives and essays tell stories with a positive message to readers. The main difference is in approach. Narratives are chronological, whereas essays are in essence dealing with philosophy and "feel." These are positive stories about people that make readers feel better. Inspirational essays on faith and religion are not always sermons; these are, instead, stories about worship, personal revelation, prayer and meditation, and love. As Osborne pointed out, these can vary greatly in length as much as in topic. Osborne offered five tips for art-of-living stories:

- *Guard against overwriting* – Do not get too ornamental or exquisite in your writing. "[T]hink more in terms of creating a small, delicate watercolor, rather than a giant oil painting," he advised (p. 22).
- *Steep yourself in what you're writing about* – Simple themes, he said, require much more than simple or superficial research.
- *Pinpoint your lesson or message* – This is a fundamental requirement, so give the article what *Reader's Digest* editors call a "takeaway" – some theme that readers can take with them on finishing the article.
- *Sharpen your eye for the telling anecdote* – These articles are about people, so use anecdotes. In fact, anecdotes can become the entire basis for an article.
- *Don't be afraid of ghosting* – Writing under someone else's name is acceptable at *Reader's Digest* because art-of-living stories are best told in first person. Thus, write for experts who cannot do it themselves, he recommended.

True-Life Stories and Case Histories

The story about the difficulties of an individual, couple, or family can be among the most read in a publication. These are true-life features, sometimes known as case histories. These types of features tell us someone else's difficult story and how the individual or family worked through it. Lessons are learned and shared. We see these in newspapers from time to time, but they are most popular with magazines and Web sites aimed at lifestyles and living content.

True-life stories are the favored content of women's magazines around the world, such as those in the United Kingdom. These stories can be about a crime that someone experienced, the personal experiences of inspirational women, and sad or shocking events that persons involved share. These narrative stories are similarly popular in the U.S. and in other parts of the world. Many readers seem to be encouraged by these triumph-over-adversity type features.

The Daily Mirror, a national tabloid newspaper in the United Kingdom, tells readers what it labels as "real life stories" (https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/real-life-stories/). Recently, *The Daily Mirror* offered numerous real-life stories of people misdiagnosed when they had cancer, the life of a mother of ten children who begins her day at 4 a.m., a woman with 30 different tattoos on her face who said they helped

her overcome shyness, and a young man who binged on drugs and spent thousands of pounds gambling who found recovery. These stories are about parenting, relationships and dating, health, extraordinary people, and dieting and weight loss

You can often learn easiest from example. We find an exceptional situation and learn about it. These case histories, as they sometimes are called, enter the category of service feature writing but often offer approaches by other features such as human-interest stories or profiles. Just as how-to stories, listings, and art-of-living stories teach readers, so do case histories. A good case history can hit home for your readers. A patient who has had heart trouble and has made it through major surgery to repair the problem has a story to tell. You will tell it. Other patients and their friends and families will benefit from the story.

Best Sources for Service Stories

Individuals who can be your best sources for service articles come from a wide and diverse set of locations and careers. Here is a list of categories:

How-to Stories:

Craftsmen and women
Mechanics
Artists
Technicians
Authors of books
Inventors
Investors
Government
Blogs
Builders and contractors
Carpenters and electricians
Gardeners and horticulturists
Chefs and culinary experts
Consumer advocates
Scientists
Decorators
Social media sites
Web sites

Lists and Listings:

Historians
Reference librarians
Government studies
Government
Blogs
Statisticians
Museum curators
Census data
Social media sites
Web sites

Art of Living Stories:

Religious leaders
Lawyers
Psychiatrists
Chronological case histories
Physicians
Psychiatrists
Police officers
Historians
Published or online personal journals
Social media sites
Physicians
Psychologists and counselors
Financial advisors
Social workers
Psychologists
Teachers
Sociologists
Personal Web sites
Blogs

A case history outlines the case of a person for readers in a moment-by-moment, day-by-day approach. It is a story often told chronologically. In fact, these articles are sometimes organized by date and time. In telling the story of a heart patient, no detail should be spared. And in concluding it, the resolution must be achieved. Tell readers whether the efforts of doctors and nurses paid off – did the problem get solved? Did the patient live? Are there breakthroughs in health care to result from this?

Use Caution for Service Features

It is quite possible to get so enthusiastic about how-to stories that you can forget potential dangers. As a writer, you must emphasize safety. Especially dangerous, or potentially dangerous, subjects, such as those involving human and pet health. Poisons (in gardening), gas (in grilling or dealing with what might be a leak), or electricity (installations and wiring), might need an extra expert dimension of safety written into them. As a writer, you do not want to de-emphasize the possibility of risk in the stories you write – if it exists. On the other hand, stories that involve other kinds of risk, such as financial investments, should be written just as carefully and thoughtfully for readers. You cannot write enough cautions and safety reminders into these types of stories.

The ethical considerations on stories about crime such as computer hacking or auto theft, for example, are many. Do you write stories about how to access a colleague's e-mail account at work? Parking lot car thefts? How to get free Wi-Fi or streaming? How much do you reveal? Is it right to have a former thief as a source – and is it proper for him or her to describe, in detail, how to obtain software or tools? Or, if your community has a problem with arson in a particular neighborhood, should you write a how-to story about how an arsonist does the job?

Advice for Writing Service Features

One magazine editor who has nailed down the concepts of how-to and service features content is the late Joe Oldham. He was the long-time editor of Hearst's *Popular Mechanics* in New York and was one of the nation's top automobile writers. The magazine's editor for 19 years, he gave this advice about service features:

> If I had the opportunity to say only one thing to a young writer who was interested in making a living as a feature writer for magazines, newspapers, or any other medium for that matter, it would be this: Write the way you speak. Be natural, Oldham said.
>
> Write the words as if you were having a conversation with someone. Imagine that you're telling the reader a story or giving the reader some new information. This is especially true of service-oriented and/or how-to articles. Here, it's essential that you get the interest of the reader with the lead, then hold his interest by transmitting information in an easy, accessible style. For most of us, that means, again, writing the way you speak.
>
> Just about everyone can speak to another person and transmit a thought. That's really all nonfiction, feature writing is. There's nothing mysterious,

nothing magical about it. It's just transmitting a thought. Then another. And another. Until finally, you've written an article that transmits many thoughts in a logical sequence. 'Talking' to another person on paper should give your article a conversational tone. Unless you're writing a formal paper or treatise, you want that conversational tone in all your feature writing. That means speaking (on paper) clearly, using common language, and just being you. For instance, most of us speak in contractions. We say, 'You're going,' not 'You are going.' So, write that way. Your sentences will flow a lot better, he continued.

Most of us speak in the vernacular. It's true that we all have several different vocabularies, and that our writing and speaking vocabularies are not the same. Still, good writers don't differ much in the way they write and the way they speak. An easy, conversational tone is always the end result—and with it, a well written article. It always amazes me when someone I know as a regular guy writes something in a pompous, affected style that is totally unlike his natural manner and normal speech pattern. Somehow, when some people sit down at the computer, they feel that they have to become more formal or stodgy or achieve a so-called higher tone than they usually operate in as a person.

Wrong. Just the opposite is true. Good writers are who they are all the time. They don't take on a different personality when they sit down to write. Instead, they extend their own personality right into the words and sentences and paragraphs they're writing. They never step out of character. Good nonfiction writers also write to one person at a time, no matter what the circulation of their publication. Each month, *Popular Mechanics* staffers write for over 9 million readers— one at a time. Especially in nonfiction, service, how-to and the like, you've got to talk to that one person out there reading your stuff. When you reach him, you've reached them all. Use the word 'you' a lot. Not the word 'I.' You should do this. You shouldn't do that. You should buy this. But don't buy that. Sometimes the 'you' is implied. But it should always be there. Be yourself. Be natural. Relax. Write the way you speak. Then you'll be a good writer.

(Personal communication to author, May 12, 1993)

Chapter 17

Personal Experience Features

Social influencer and freelance writer Annie Vazquez is persistent and a hard worker. The popular writer describes herself on her LinkedIn page as "a body positive activist and women's lifestyle/wellness expert" (Vazquez, 2022). She is known as one of the pioneers of Miami's blogging community. She started as a fashion blogger and, "after realizing the need for body positivity, started focusing her efforts to empower others." Vazquez was voted Miami's Top Fashion Blog by *The New Times* and was awarded Best Fashion Content Creator Award at the Hispanicize x Telemundo Awards. She was also highlighted in pages of *Vogue* for pioneering the blogging style scene in Miami.

Not too long ago, however, she was teaching journalism at a Miami middle school. But she found time to write in the evenings, during time away from work, and on weekends. Early on, Vazquez wrote first-person personal experience features about the unusual and extraordinary things she does. Writing for the *Miami Herald*, she gave readers personal perspectives about living in South Florida. Despite being turned away the first time she asked for a part-time job for a suburban news section of the *Herald* because she lacked experience, she kept trying and gained that experience by writing for her campus newspaper, *The Beacon,* at Florida International University. She tells what happened next:

> After six months, I was confident with my clips and experience, and I was back at Neighbors. This time (editor) Susan Burnside hired me. My first assignment was to cover The Taste of the Grove (a food fair and festival in Miami). It was published … and so began my professional writing career.
>
> Aside from the newspaper, another writing gig ensued with the defunct *Generation Ñ* magazine. I was hired by them to write a few stories about Miami's art scene, but the magazine was struggling, and the job didn't last too long. Lucky for me, my gig was stable at *Herald* Neighbors and after five months of writing for them, my writing career would take a new spin when my editor Jon O'Neill would hand me an assignment to cover an event celebrating France's independence day, Bastille Day, she recalled.

Vazquez thus began what would become her popular personal experience series for the newspaper. She explained that what would become a multi-year personal

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experience feature writing project just evolved and was not originally planned in any particular fashion.

> The assignment was to enter a waiter and customer race at the French eatery, Brasserie Les Halles in Coral Gables and then write about the event from a first-person perspective. In this silly race where I competed mostly against other media types, I had to balance a tray with food on it and make it to the finish line first without spilling anything.
>
> It would be the first time I would write an article in first-person, which was a bit nerve-racking. But the final product, to my surprise, had my editor laughing hysterically. When Jon called me into his office, he told me I had a knack for writing in first-person and said he found me very funny, which were both big shockers for me. No one had ever said I was funny before (I can't say a joke if my life depended on it) and this was the first time an editor had really praised my work.
>
> What came next blew me away. Jon offered me to write a column about different things and activities to try in South Florida. I gladly accepted and kept it a secret from everyone except my immediate family until the first column was published. The Annie Files, my bimonthly adventure column, launched. On the cover of Neighbors was a tiny picture of me with my name and inside was my first story: 'Ride Like the Wind? Well, I Survived Windsurfing.' The column ran for six years in Neighbors and was accompanied always with photographs usually by my assigned photographer and now friend, Alex Koyler. Readers could also submit ideas for me to try and write about. The column had a huge following and still to this day people recognize me and have nice things to say about it, which I find so rewarding and flattering,
>
> With the column, I wrote about everything such as hang-gliding, training Dolphins at The Miami Seaquarium and animals at The Parrot Jungle, taking a spin in both an Indy and NASCAR car, walking on hot coals, wrestling an alligator, being a beekeeper for a day, spending 24 hours with firefighters, riding in an acrobatic plane, going up in a hot air balloon, and cooking with a top chef. To tell you I was a daredevil would be a lie. I am actually the most cautious person you will ever meet. I also am a big klutz. But I wanted to overcome these fears and I also wanted to keep my job. Whether it was fear or just a plain lack of coordination, I was candid about my feelings in my stories. I believe my honesty played an integral role in obtaining the readership I got. I also believe the topics I wrote about, people found fascinating. Plus, I think a lot of readers identified with me. The reason I say this is because most people are afraid to try the things I wrote about and reading about someone else who is also afraid but is willing to be brave and do it is in a way motivating.
>
> (Personal communication to author, September 15, 2008)

Vazquez eventually stopped writing her personal experience column. For a while, she worked as a newswriter for a local television station and in public relations, trying to find the right writing role. Then she began teaching English and journalism and continued to write part-time.

"Lucky for me I was contacted by an editor at the *Herald's* Neighbors to help revive another column called Shopping Safari, which featured different boutiques and stores. I loved fashion, so it was a start," she said. "In between, I wrote everything from dance reviews to business stories to profiles."

Regardless of whether you are telling a story from your own experiences or shaping someone else's personal experiences for publication, these are feature stories people seem to love. Most nonfiction writers have experienced events in their lives that would make good personal experience feature stories. One enterprising college student writer jumped out of an airplane (with a parachute) to write a feature about skydiving for her biweekly campus newspaper. Without that frightening experience, she might not have had the right mood, the touch of drama and fear, and the right words for her first-person feature article about skydiving. Insightful writing is one primary goal of personal experience feature stories. Two other college students, during a Semester at Sea around-the-world trip, experienced a new Bollywood movie in a neighborhood movie theater in Chennai, India, and found they were the only non-locals in a very large cinema. Their story about their evening was a fun read filled with numerous cultural observations, reactions, and unique experiences.

A personal experience feature story allows you to do much more than the usual feature article because you, as a writer, can become highly involved in the storytelling. Most beginning writers have been encouraged to take themselves out of the story – to de-personalize the story – as much as possible. However, personal experience feature writing offers something unique in journalism – the chance to become part of a personalized story.

Writers are involved in interesting activities and write about them with amazing regularity. Travel writing, as noted in another chapter, is often first-person and personal experience-oriented. Human interest features also often offer a personal perspective. And often personal experience stories simply give readers the story from a unique point of view that results in greater understanding of a situation. Look at these recent examples:

- Nancy Lova (2021), a travel photographer based in the United Kingdom, wrote a first-person account for the CNN Web site travel section about lessons she has learned as a Black traveler. Noting that travel has given her a stable identity, her essay discussed traveling as a Black woman but also traveling alone. She recounts experiences, both good and bad, and how she learned about different cultures and traditions and history, people, and architecture of many different places.
- *Miami Herald* feature writer Evan Benn (2008) worked for a week as a chef's assistant in the high-end Mandarin Oriental Hotel's Azul restaurant kitchen on South Beach. Benn's story, which included a multimedia package of videos on the newspaper's Web site, told his experiences of being a home cooking enthusiast who was entering the professional world of cooking for the first time in first person. He tells the full-page story for the newspaper's Tropical Life section in a chronological manner and included details of his mistakes and the valuable lessons learned.
- *The Washington Post* food writer Allison Robicelli (2022) missed a flight from Chicago's O'Hare airport to her home in Baltimore by just minutes. She was stuck at the airport with nowhere to go for 12 hours. But she did not get upset and she tried to make the best of it. As passengers left and the airport emptied,

she realized that the huge airport was all hers. The 41-year-old writer decided to leisurely hike from Terminal 1 to Terminal 5 and back. Take a tour. Look around. With the crowds gone, she wrote that she was surprised with the emptiness of late night and was able to enjoy her walk with very few, if any, people around. Her experience wound up as a personal experience perspective feature highlighted in her newspaper. "I got to spend an entire night by myself at O'Hare International Airport." She tweeted. She saw the sights – the deserted food courts, the vacant Rotunda, learned about the airport's namesake, inspected a huge brontosaurus, waved at security cameras – and told her readers what her experience was like.

- Writer Rebecca Saunders (2021) moved from London to tiny coastal Ena, Japan, with a two-week interlude in Tokyo, to experience life in the remote Japanese countryside on the Kil Peninsula in 2018. Not many of us can do that or are willing to do it even if we are able. Saunders told readers on CNN's Web site about her experiences during her two months there. In her in first-person feature, she tells readers about the quiet village life, being cut off from many modern conveniences. She describes the people she met, the spiders and tiny green frogs, food problems and how they were solved, language challenges since "I didn't know enough Japanese," drinking sake during a typhoon, experiencing the ground shake during an earthquake, enjoying the village shrine's festival, and the fact that residents seldom saw overseas visitors.

When you become part of your story, such as the ones described above, your readers become closer to you because they can identify with you. Readers can become part of the story because the writer has shared his or her personal observations and experiences as well as his or her thoughts and emotions. You offer detail in your writing from close-up observations. This type of personalized feature article can be as simple as spending a shift at work with someone – getting involved personally. Personal writing is a broad-based approach to your craft. Your own point of view makes a difference in any story, but on these types of assignments, you can let it become part of the story itself.

Two Basic Approaches

Generally, there are two basic approaches to personal experience stories:

- *Personal experiences of others about which you write* – These stories describe in detail the unusual and appealing experiences of individuals in a highly personal approach but are not written in first person. These are your descriptions as a writer who uses the experiences of another person for the basis of the stories.
- *Personal experiences of your own* – These are commonly called first-person stories. These articles draw on your own experiences for primary material for the story. These articles are often accounts of medical problems, trips, crime incidents, life-or-death accident situations, human relationships, family experiences, and other similar events. You are the reporter, the storyteller, and the central source – or one of the major sources – in the story. These can be everyday occurrences, but the articles that receive the most attention are unusual, adventurous, frustrating, or dramatic.

New York editor Shana Aborn (1995) has served as *Ladies' Home Journal* senior editor, and edited *MAMM*, *Woman's World*, *Babbel*, and the Web site Romper. She asks four questions about possible personal experience stories before she decides they are marketable:

- First, she wants to know if the experience is *dramatic*.
- Second, she asks if it is *timely*.
- Third, she checks to see how *involved* the author is in the action.
- Fourth, she checks to see if there was an ending or *resolution* to the experience.

She also strongly advises new personal experience writers to stick to the facts, do interviews with experts and witnesses, begin the story with impact, and organize it well so the chronology is clear. Furthermore, Aborn recommends using direct quotations in the storytelling, developing the people involved as you would do characters, avoiding too much detail and personal emotion, and keeping an eye on the tone of the piece.

Feature writer and teacher Nancy Kelton (1988) said personal experience articles should look at the world as honestly as possible, "seeing the truths—both the dark and the light—within our experiences so that we can share them with other people who will nod and say, 'Yes, that's how it is. I've been there, too'." (p. 24).

Components of Personal Experience Features

A personal experience article must provide readers with an unusual story, an adventure, or a real-life drama. A personal experience article should also attempt to put that story in context. Often, the context is current trends in the community or society such as those affecting medical care or employment. Yet it could add the dimension of historical context as well. Nancy Kelton (1988), author of the book *Writing from Personal Experience*, tells beginning writers there are three major components of personal experience stories:

- *A point of view* – What is the unique way in which you can present the situation? How are you or your source involved? What perspective do you offer? An inside view will generally be preferred. Usually, Kelton said, this fares better than filling the story with descriptive details of the actions of others at the expense of personal reactions and opinions. You must tell how it felt, what it meant, and how you grew as a person during and after the experience. This, she said, is the best way to write a personal experience story.
- *Arrival at some basic truth* – After you have made your trip, been released from the hospital, survived the criminal assault, or floated to the ground after parachuting from an airplane, you should be able to reach a conclusion about what you have learned. Reach a new level of understanding that you convey to readers.
- *Emotional involvement* – It helps readers to share your experience if you can place them in the middle of your emotional reaction to the situation. You cannot afford to hide your feelings in writing such an article. You have to offer a complete description of what you felt. Write in such a manner that you can put your reader next to you, watching the experience all over again.

Kelton, who has written for *The New York Times* and its magazine, *The Boston Globe*, and *Parents*, said putting these three main components to work is the key to a successful story. Here's how Kelton does it:

- *Pick an experience you care about deeply* – Some writers, Kelton related, like to say that subjects pick writers, not vice versa. Although you do not have control over the events that you might use for an article, you can control your selection of those about which you feel most strongly. These are the ones to use for your articles.
- *Don't make publication your primary goal* – Your primary objective should be to discover how you feel about an experience by writing about it. Afterward, in writing, you also try to publish the article, and you have an added benefit. "Your initial satisfaction should come from the writing and the discoveries you make in the process," Kelton (p. 22) said. Her new experiences with motherhood, which she eventually wrote about, were her reasons for thinking about and trying to understand these new emotions she felt.
- *Don't write a personal experience article to vent anger, indignation, or other negative emotions* – Sometimes you experience things that make you angry, such as bad customer service at a retail store, traffic jams, or an annoying neighbor's lifestyle. Personal experience articles should not be used to vent.
- *Have the courage to reveal yourself honestly* – You must convey feelings by opening yourself to others, perhaps thousands of others. That takes nerve, Kelton said, and is not for everyone. These feelings are not always positive and bright.
- *Don't tell what you went through … show it* – To show it means to dramatize it. Reset the scene and put yourself and the reader there together. Often this means telling the story in chronological fashion. This is a simple step-by-step process that takes readers from beginning to end.
- *Don't show everything* – Avoid writing about the mundane details of the experience. Much of the time, too many details drag the story down. The clutter can get in your way. Is the detail relevant to the story? If so, include it. If not, forget it.

Reporter Amy Sherman's 1,700-word story about the dependency of some American consumers on the large "megastore" approach to shopping used a first-person approach that illustrates these points. She showed readers with sufficient detail from her own experience that the lives and spending of many Americans are deeply linked to major corporations. Writing for the business section of the *Miami Herald*, Sherman (2007) decided to take one week out of her life as a woman expecting her first child to find out what changes would occur if she stopped shopping at malls and chain stores. She decided to set some practical limitations to the experiment as Sherman tells readers in her opening paragraphs:

> *My grandfather, who ran an independent clothing shop in a small Pennsylvania city for decades, used to say that consumers who shopped at malls and chains should be shot.*
>
> *He was joking. Sort of.*
>
> *His business went under a few years ago --- which he blamed on the cheaper chains. I still feel a twinge of guilt when I shop at big box stores. Now that I am*

getting ready for my first baby, it seems we are at Babies R Us, Target, Publix and other chains every weekend. But then we ran into big chain troubles. We had to return two defective cribs from Babies R Us.

Luckily we found a crib for the same price at the independently owned Baby Love. The staff was knowledgeable, old enough to have children themselves and the crib arrived in good condition within days. I had an idea:

Could I swear off big box shops and large chains?

Where would I buy my groceries near my Fort Lauderdale home? Could I buy gas? What if I wanted to buy something basic like a book? See a movie? And if I was able to find these services locally, how much more would it cost? Would I get better customer service or feel like I had a more enjoyable experience at a small place?

Here was my criteria: Shop within 15 miles of my home or office for one week in late October and early November. I defined "independent" as a business owned by an individual who owned no more than five of the same businesses. I told no store employees about my experiment until the end of my purchase so I wouldn't get special treatment.

Some services were easy. For lunch I had dozens of options close to my Fort Lauderdale office. But others were much more challenging: I drove 18 miles to an upscale Kosher grocery market to get produce.

It was much easier to shop at independent businesses in my hometown of Amherst, Mass., which had a traditional downtown and my second home, Minneapolis, which had clusters of neighborhood shopping districts.

But South Florida is a car culture. And officials have given the green light to practically any developer who wanted to build megastores with little thought to fostering the growth of locally owned businesses.

Experts critical of the big box infusion say it is possible to avoid the chains … .
(Sherman, 2007, p. 1E)

Identifying Interesting Experiences

What have you done that would make interesting reading for others? From some of the examples discussed so far, you are aware of what makes successful personal experience stories. Much of it is simple good or bad luck – depending on the nature of the event. Massachusetts-based freelance writer Howard Scott believes feature writers often overlook their own experiences. "In the search for subjects, many writers ignore an obvious possibility: their own personal experiences," he said. "Although these events do need some drama, tension, and a resolution (or solution), they don't have to be earth-shattering or catastrophic. Most of us have such experiences, and writers can make them come alive on paper" (Scott, 1992, p. 359).

A writer may find himself or herself in a place to develop a story by sheer coincidence. Your news sense is often a good guide. The elements that make a good feature become even stronger if you are personally involved in that topic or event. So, instead of a routine story about the problems that people have settling with insurance

companies after a break-in, an automobile accident, or a natural disaster, the story takes on more meaning if you have had the misfortune to experience such an event yourself and can write about it.

Scott, who has written personal experience features for magazines and newspapers, feels you should consider several things when thinking about your own experiences as potential material for features:

> Think of a personal experience as a series of events that happened to you and might be worth sharing with others. What else constitutes a personal experience? Have you ever spent time with a famous person, lived through a medical crisis, lived in or visited an exotic place, taken up any strange hobbies? Have you had a close brush with death—an accident or a sickness, recovered from a disabling addiction, attempted and accomplished a difficult feat?
>
> (p. 359)

Sometimes the routine at home makes good material. Many experienced columnists and feature writers do this. They are not hesitant to discuss topics such as sex education by using their own families as an example for others. Writing in first person, such writers even mention husbands, wives, and children by name in relating stories to readers when making their points in their regular features.

Obviously, serious subjects such as life-or-death situations and public safety and health make compelling personal experience stories. We read about many such personal stories at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Individuals such as healthcare workers, family members, and those who recovered told their stories.

A first-person approach to modern health issues such as drug addiction is illustrated by a student journalist who was once a cocaine addict. Her experiences gave a critical dimension to her story about the impact of drugs on a middle-class coed that she could not achieve as meaningfully from a source in an interview. If the student can bring herself to write about this trying part of her life and others learn can from it, then the story has impact. Her story, which was written for a university newspaper's monthly magazine, told chronologically how her increasing dependency on drugs cost her a promising career, her marriage, and an entire lifestyle. Her article described how she eventually managed to win the battle with drugs and revealed the high price she paid. From this writer's rare personal situation, we got a peek into someone else's life that taught us much.

Ideally, personal experience stories should relate to broader community concerns, if possible. Although some incidents can be interesting as isolated happenings, an experience takes on more value if it is placed in a more meaningful big picture. The final test is to determine if the experience is "writable." In other words, can you tell this story to someone else? Would someone else want to know about what you experienced? If so, then you may have a good story idea.

Find the Best Storytellers

In every community there are entertaining and valued storytellers. You might have occasion to tell your own personal experience stories from time to time, but much of your grist will be from other sources, people known as the local storytellers. Who are

they? They take many roles – minister, scout leader, historian, police officer, teacher, park ranger, and social worker. People who are involved with other people on a regular basis often have the best experiences to tell. If you can find one or more of these persons, you will have rich potential for a story.

Where do you find them? Some storytellers put on performances to make a living and some tell stories as a volunteer and just for fun. These individuals can be found at community centers, parks, or schools. They appear from time to time at local bookstores, too, entertaining children and their parents. They may give tours of unique neighborhoods or your community's historic districts. Some tell stories in costume and in character. Some teach adult classes or volunteer at museums or historic places. Many storytellers are often found in areas where tourists or other visitors gather. These individuals can be found just about anywhere but look for places where they have a chance to share what they know with others, and you might just connect with someone with a good personal experience or two on which to build a feature story.

Research, as you are often reminded, makes a difference even in personal experience storytelling. You might be aware of events that can be the basis of a good personal experience story. By searching records, archives, and even social media, you can often get the names of persons who were witnesses, victims, or otherwise involved in the event. These are also some of your best storytellers.

Tell a Meaningful Story

Some personal experience feature stories can be called factual short stories. This might help you to remember a good approach to writing a meaningful story – write and organize it as you might handle a short story, but just be sure to keep the content factual. Accomplishing this is easier than it seems. It helps a great deal if you use the same storytelling devices of short-story writers:

- *Dialogue* – Use an ample number of direct quotations and reconstructed conversations between key individuals.
- *Description* – Bring in plenty of rich descriptive words and detail. This includes using active verbs and adverbs and impression-filled adjectives.
- *Plot* – If your story permits, try to organize it so it has a plot or storyline. Make it suspenseful if appropriate. Give the story a moral. You should introduce the plot or storyline early in the article and stick with it throughout.
- *Facts* – Stick to the facts. Do not embellish or create details to enhance the storyline. Use real names of those involved, real places, actual dates and times, and other factual details. The reality adds a truly valuable dimension to the story that cannot come from any other type of writing technique.

There can be problems with telling a story. One of the most serious ones is selective or failing memory. On some personal experience story assignments, you might depend on memories of events that occurred months or years ago. Your memory gets hazy. There may be no written record of events, either. Fading memory filters out certain details over time. If this happens to you, it can happen to your sources, too. You must be prepared to go to extra lengths for details that might be forgotten. For example,

you may be able to use yearbooks, photo collections on your phone, social media postings, and other records to stimulate detailed recollections. Many writers, when faced with missing information, are better off admitting to readers that they cannot recall some detail or piece of the puzzle. Do not guess or create. This openness and honesty are personal touches that make the storytelling even more appealing to readers.

Use Your Own Experiences

Has anything extraordinary or unique ever happened to you? Would it make an appealing story for others? Can others learn from your experiences? There are unusual events and circumstances that occur in your life that could generate a story. Feature writers experience the full range of human experiences, and you should be prepared and willing to write about the unusual events that you experience. Of course, the ordinary activities in your life might make good feature story material, too.

The late *Washington Post* reporter George Lardner, Jr., may have taken on the most difficult assignment of his career when he decided to write a story about the death of his 21-year-old art student daughter, Kristin. Lardner's article was a detailed account of how the criminal justice system failed in protecting his daughter from a jilted boyfriend who stalked and murdered the woman in Boston in 1992 (Kurtz, 1993; Lardner, 1992). The effort won the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing.

Lardner, a 30-year veteran of the *Post* staff, was normally an investigative reporter. He had written about the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy in 1968, the Chappaquiddick incident involving Ted Kennedy, the Watergate cover-up trial, and the 1980s Iran-Contra scandal. But he turned to a very different writing style – a much more personalized feature approach in telling the story of his daughter's death and her murderer's suicide. His story, "The Stalking of Kristin: The Law Made It Easy for My Daughter's Killer," was published in the newspaper's Outlook section. In first-person style, he described what he wanted to achieve with the story.

> This was a crime that could have and should have been prevented. I write about it as a sort of cautionary tale, in anger at a system of justice that failed to protect my daughter, a system that is addicted to looking the other way, especially at the evil done to women.
>
> (Lardner, 1992, p. C1)

Lardner said his work on the story began when he spoke with a Brookline, MA, police officer. Lardner discovered, after talking with the officer, how little he really knew about what had happened to his daughter. In his efforts to find out the truth about Kristin's case and her death, he collected enough information that would grow into his story. This is how Lardner began his story:

> *The phone was ringing insistently, hurrying me back to my desk. My daughter Helen was on the line, sobbing so hard she could barely catch her breath.*
>
> *"Dad," she shouted. "Come home! Right away!"*

I was stunned. I had never heard her like this before. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"What happened?"

"It's–it's Kristin. She's been shot—and killed."

Kristin? My Kristin? Our Kristin? I'd talked to her the afternoon before. Her last words to me were, "I love you Dad." Suddenly I had trouble breathing myself. It was 7:30 p.m. on Saturday, May 30. In Boston, where Kristin Lardner was an art student, police were cordoning off an apartment building a couple of blocks from the busy, sunlit sidewalk where she'd been killed 90 minutes earlier. She had been shot in the head and face by an ex-boyfriend who was under court order to stay away from her. When police burst into his apartment, they found him sprawled on his bed, dead from a final act of self-pity.

This was a crime that could and should have been prevented. I write about it as a sort of cautionary tale, in anger at a system of justice that failed to protect my daughter, a system that is addicted to looking the other way, especially at the evil done to women.

But first let me tell you about my daughter. She was, at 21, the youngest of our five children, born in D.C. and educated in the city's public schools, where not much harm befell her unless you count her taste for rock music, lots of jewelry, and funky clothes from Value Village. She loved books, went trick-or-treating dressed as Greta Garbo, played one of the witches in "Macbeth" and had a grand time in tap-dancing class even in her sneakers. She made life sparkle … .

(Lardner, 1992, p. C1)

Lardner told the story chronologically after setting it up with this lead. Following the description of his daughter, he traced the history of the relationship— how Kristin met the man who would stalk and kill her and himself. Lardner gave readers detailed biographical material about Cartier, her murderer. As he did, the story became more third person in voice. Lardner quoted friends of his daughter and persons who knew Cartier, a man with psychological problems. The detail of Lardner's writing included numerous incidents and anecdotes recounted by persons who knew the couple. He also used his investigative reporting skills in locating and reviewing public records involving his daughter's murderer. His eye for detail is evident in this paragraph midway through the story:

Left in her bedroom at her death was a turntable with Stravinsky's "Rites of Spring" on it and a tape player with a punk tune by Suicidal Tendencies. Her books, paperbacks mostly, included Alice Walker's "The Color Purple" and Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale," along with favorites by Sinclair Lewis, Dickens and E.B. White and a book about upper- and middle-caste women in Hindu families in Calcutta.

Her essays for school, lucid and well-written, showed a great deal of thought about art, religion and the relationship between men and women. She saw her art as an expression of parts of her hidden deep inside, waiting to be pulled out, but still to be guarded closely: "Art could be such a selfish thing. Everything she made, she made for herself and not one bit of it could she bear to be parted with.

> *Whether she loved it, despised it or was painfully ashamed of it—she couldn't stand the thought of these little parts of her being taken away and put into someone else's possession."*
>
> (Lardner, 1992, p. C1)

Still another insightful passage utilized another writing technique. Lardner (1992) used recreated dialogue:

> *What did she see in him? It's a question her parents keep asking themselves. But some things are fairly obvious. He reminded her of Jason, her friend from New Zealand. He could be charming. "People felt a great deal of empathy for him," said Octavia Ossola, director of the child care center at the home where Cartier grew up, "because it was reasonably easy to want things to be better for him." At the Harbor School, said executive director Art DiMauro, "he was quite endearing. The staff felt warmly about Michael."*
>
> *So, at first, did Kristin. "She called me up, really excited and happy," said Christian Dupre, a friend since childhood. "She said 'I met this good guy, he's really nice.'"*
>
> *Kristin told her oldest sister, Helen, and her youngest brother, Charlie, too. But Helen paused when Kristin told her that Cartier was a bouncer at Bunratty's and had a tattoo.*
>
> *"Well, ah, is he nice?" Helen asked.*
>
> *"Well, he's nice to me," Kristin said.*
>
> *Charlie, who had just entered college after a few years of blue-collar jobs, was not impressed. "Get rid of him," he advised his sister. "He's a zero."*
>
> *Her friends say they got along well at first. He told Kristin he'd been in jail for hitting a girlfriend, but called it a bum rap. She did not know he'd attacked Rose Ryan with a scissors, that he had a rap sheet three pages long.*
>
> *Kristin, friends say, often made excuses for his behavior. But they soon started to argue. Cartier was irrationally jealous, accusing her of going out with men who stopped by just to talk. During one argument, apparently over her art, Cartier hit her, then did his "usual thing" and started crying.*
>
> (Lardner, 1992, p. C1)

Lardner completed the story with a continuation of the chronology of his daughter's relationship, her and Cartier's breakup, the stalking, and the final days of her life. He reconstructed what happened in her life for the three or so months leading up to the day of the murder. He also reviewed events that occurred following her death: his efforts to trace the weapon used in the murder-suicide and detailed descriptions taken from public records of his daughter's efforts to stop the stalking and harassment after she had ended the relationship. The final portion of the story is devoted to explaining how the judicial system failed to protect her. This section alone is a startling lesson for readers. He questioned, "How many—[people] should have known she was in

grave danger?" (p. C1). But his concluding paragraph effectively summarized just how little the judicial system worked. "The system is so mindless that when the dead Cartier failed to show up in Boston Municipal Court as scheduled on June 19, a warrant was issued for his arrest. It is still outstanding" (p. C1).

Long-time *New York Times* correspondent Nan Robertson (1982) told another remarkable personal story for *The Times* Sunday Magazine that explained her battle against a medical condition known as "toxic shock syndrome." The article, appealing because of the very personal story it told, earned her the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing. Robertson, who died at age 83 in 2009, wrote in rich, precise detail about her experience with the rare medical problem. Structurally, she took a chronological approach, beginning just hours before she was stricken. She took readers through her near-fatal attack, the ride to the hospital, diagnosis, and treatment. Her story used direct quotations of recalled dialogue during her attack and treatment. She also depended on family members and friends to remember details and quotations, and she used a diary one friend kept for her during her hospitalization. After setting the scene – her trip to the hospital in Illinois – readers are told the following:

> *This is the story of how, almost miraculously and with brilliant care, I survived and prevailed over that grisly and still mysterious disease. Almost every major organ of my body, including my heart, lungs and liver, was deeply poisoned. This is also the story of how—with luck and expertise—this life-threatening disease can be avoided, detected, monitored, treated and destroyed before it reaches the acute stage … .*
>
> (Robertson, 1982, p. 30)

Robertson's (1982) article, written in first person, is understandable even when she discussed the medical reasons for the disease. Readers can share the experience of her personal fears, her suffering and her pain, and her joy in winning the battle. Yet, she also incorporated considerable discussion about the disease by experts from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other medical research centers into her story. Woven into her own experiences, this made the article instructional as well as entertaining.

These examples illustrate how reporters with a variety of experiences that appeal to readers can use their own lives as the basis for their articles. Neither Lardner nor Robertson would have wanted to go through their experiences. But they did and eventually turned them into learning experiences for themselves and others.

Organizing Narrative Stories

Personal experience features require care in organizing the sometimes-large amounts of material. Because you, or someone you are working with, have experienced the subject of the story firsthand, writing about the experience can become difficult because you or your source is so close to it. Many features rise or fall because of their organizational structure. A strong personal experience story depends on the organization also. Because many personal experience stories are not written in the traditional inverted pyramid – with the most important facts first – a

strong lead makes a difference. This lead is the first step in the organizational effort. It must capture the flavor of the article by hinting at its essence without giving away the outcome or message. The lead must arouse the interest of readers by piquing their curiosity, teasing them, and even raising their eyebrows in reaction to what they have read.

Personal Experience Story Sources

These are some of the most common sources to write about the personal experiences of others and the personal experiences of your own:

Researching the experiences of others
Social media newsfeed posts and pages
Personal Web sites
Specialized Web sites
Digital publications archives
Civil and criminal court files
Radio and television talk shows
Neighbors and friends
History books
Local museums and schools
Your own experiences
Family albums
School yearbooks
Observation
Notebooks, diaries, or logbooks
Home movies and videotapes
Conversations with family and friends

Most personal experience articles are organized as essays written in chronological order, simply recounting a series of events that will interest readers. Stories often follow a loose chronological structure with some small departures.

An essay requires a basic organizational structure also – a beginning or introduction, body, and ending. Chronological stories must be told in a time-based order of events – often including the times to help the reader understand the sequencing.

It is essential that you stick to the topic – that is, remain focused. Because it is often a personal story you are telling, the temptation can be great to drift away from the real focus. You must also keep the story moving. Doing this requires pacing and a skilled use of transitions. You can tell every single episode that contributes to the entire experience one item at a time, but you must constantly try to tie each item together with good transitions that remind the reader of the links. For example, using times of the day or days of the week in a chronological piece aids readers a great deal. Helter-skelter movement around a series of events confuses readers and can lose them.

It is important to consider voice in your storytelling. Like travel writing, personal experience features are often written in first person. When you are telling a story that you have experienced yourself, it is often easier to write it in first person. You should also remember that when writing a personal experience story from someone else's experience, the best writing approach is third person. Taking a first-person approach is only confusing to the reader if your byline is on the article and someone else is really telling the story.

Service Features: The Core of Magazines

The late John Mack Carter, the former editor of *Good Housekeeping* and president of Hearst Magazine Enterprises, believed that personal experience features are the heart of what magazines do best. Carter explained:

> To my way of thinking, the personal experience feature is the core of magazine journalism, one of the hallmarks that sets us apart from the news media. In one form or another—the first-person article, the case history, anecdotes, nostalgia—I consider personal experience the most important part of the mix of features in *Good Housekeeping*.
>
> In *Good Housekeeping*, these articles may take any of ten different formats:
>
> - *The exclusive celebrity interview*. Two examples of this type of article that we've run in *GH*: "My 12 Years with Prince Charles" by Stephen Barry and "Diana's Life as a Wife, Princess and Mother."
> - *Crime and suspense*. Two examples: "Shattered Night," the trial of the wife of a famous heart surgeon who, after suffering years of physical and psychological abuse, shot and killed her husband. "Who Killed Patricia Gilmore?" This young woman was killed by her former boyfriend after the authorities failed to take his threats seriously.
> - *Weight loss stories*. We look for new but sound breakthroughs in weight loss products, techniques, or diets. An example: "I Lost 100 Pounds Through Hypnosis."
> - *A miracle or legal first*. Two examples: "A New Life for My Joi." This is the story of the first pancreas transplant as a treatment for severe diabetes. "The 14 Million Dollar Woman." Story of Dorothy Thompson, who initiated and won a landmark antidiscrimination suit against the U.S. government.
> - *A woman's personal courage triumphs over a difficult challenge*. Example: "Alice Williams' Impossible Dream." Inspiring story of how a sharecropper's daughter, the only one among her siblings to graduate high school, managed to put her own 11 children through college.
> - *A provocative issue*. Examples: "Doctors and Rape." The trial of a young nurse who accused three doctors of raping her. "Malpractice." A doctor and expert witness opens his casebook on malpractice suits, some of which have made medical and legal history.
> - *Personal stories of medical oddities*. Examples: "I Froze to Death—But Lived." A young girl, caught in a Minnesota blizzard, was frozen literally as

stiff as a board—but much to her doctor's amazement, she recovered fully. "My Heart Stopped While My Baby Was Being Born." Doctors thought there was a high probability that neither Laura Spitler nor her baby would survive—but they both beat the odds.

- *Unique family lifestyle*. Examples: "A Very Different Kind of Family." A fascinating glimpse into what it was like growing up in a polygamous Mormon household with 47 brothers and sisters. "His, Mine—Ours." What happened when a mother of two married a widower with four—and got his former mother-in-law as well.
- *The brief, personal, nostalgic essay*. Examples: "A Spoonful of Love." The precious gifts passed down from mother to daughter. "Watch Out, Great Grandma is Coming—" An anecdotal tale of multigenerational life.
- *A woman's problem and how she solves it*. Examples: "My Husband Was a Tightwad" and "I Fell in Love With My Doctor."

(Personal communication to author, May 23, 1993)

Chapter 18

Humor in Feature Writing

Comedian David Sedaris, the Thurber Prize for American Humor winner in 2003, uses public radio, books, and other printed forms as outlets for his first-person style of humor. Writing about himself often, his books and essays have become best-sellers around the world. Dozens of his essays have been published in *The New Yorker* and *Esquire*. Using exaggeration and a dash of fictionalization, he often tells stories about himself, his family (one sister is actress Amy Sedaris), other people in his life, work, growing up, and his life in France and England. The result is self-deprecating humor that readers can identify with and that they enjoy in large numbers.

All of us love to be entertained and humor is a globally popular form of entertainment. So, what is funny to you? What makes us laugh? Humor is defined by some authorities as a person's disposition or temperament, maybe a state of mind. *Webster's New World Dictionary* (1966) defined humor as whim or fancy. Then it added, well into the definition, "the quality that makes something seem funny, amusing, or ludicrous; comicality—the ability to perceive, appreciate, or express what is funny" (p. 708).

Scholars have been studying humor since the days of the Greek philosophers. It takes many different forms. As a writer, your approach to humor can be jokes, brief fillers, quips, or sketches, essays, columns, or even a more traditional feature article. Humor remains an elusive concept and there still is no agreement on how humor should be defined. The bottom line is simple enough—what is humorous is different to everyone. Humor historians Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill (1978) put it this way: "[L]aughter is a highly subjective response. So, writers who are foolhardy enough to discuss the humor which does or doesn't produce it are an endangered species" (p. vii).

The market for high-quality humorous writing is always strong. A truly funny and creative writer can just about fill in the blanks on his or her own paycheck for full-time work or freelance assignments. Some publications specialize in humor, but most simply use it along with other content. Some news outlets use humor as spot features; others use it as a regular item in columns or departments. Still, others use humor only as fill material. Regardless, if you have an eye and ear for funny stories, and if you have the ability to express things in a humorous way, humor might be a potential specialization for you.

To be successful as a humor writer – people such as Sedaris, Alexandra Petri, Dave Barry, James McBride, Damon Young, Kira Jane Buxton, Mike Birbiglia, Garrison Keillor, Simon Rich, John Hodgman, Patricia Lockwood, Trevor Noah, and Jenny

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Allen – requires a combination of keen wit, observation skills, knowledge of human nature, basic hard work, and a little luck. These are some of America's most popular contemporary humorists:

- Florida writer Dave Barry, winner of a 1988 Pulitzer Prize for his satirical commentary and a 2020 and 2013 finalist for the Thurber Prize for American Humor, is the author of numerous best-selling humor books about working, traveling, children, and health. His humor features, such as his annual review of odd and unusual holiday season gifts, appear routinely in The *Miami* Herald, *The Washington Post*, and elsewhere. His unusual and distinctive approach to ordinary topics is part of what has made him popular. He has also recently begun to write offbeat fiction.
- Garrison Keillor, perhaps best known for his long series of shows on National Public Radio (NPR), began as a writer for *The New Yorker*. His stories for the "Prairie Home Companion" have entertained both theater audiences and radio audiences for many years. His books and occasional magazine features focus on the life and values of people living in mythical Lake Wobegon in Minnesota.
- Calvin Trillin is a humorist, novelist, poet, travel writer, and short story author who frequently writes for publications such as *The New Yorker, Time,* and *The Nation*. Winner of the 2012 Thurber Prize, he lectures and has performed one-man humor shows in New York. His essays are filled with commentary about food and eating and, more generally, the American scene. He is known for his success in highly diverse forms of writing.
- Ian Frazier, regular humor columnist for *The New Yorker*, has been honored with the 2009 Thurber Prize for his book *Lamentations of the Father*. He is also the author of *Coyote v. Acme*, a collection of his essays.
- Arizona humorist Laurie Notaro wrote a weekly humor column for the *Arizona Republic* for about 10 years before a collection of her best essays, *The Idiot Girls' Action-Adventure Club*, was published in 2002 and quickly made the best-seller list. She has since written 11 books. Her success as a humorist is based on storytelling about her own life, which she says is often embarrassing, really stupid, and out of control.
- Trevor Noah is best-known for hosting "The Daily Show" on Comedy Central from 2015 to 2022. While following Jon Stewart might seem difficult, he has been a success on the show and in numerous other ways. He is one of the most popular touring standup comedians in the world and his book, *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood,* earned the 2017 Thurber Prize.
- James Lileks is a humor writer, novelist, and blogger. He is the author of eight books (two are collections of his weekly column that he writes for the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*). Based in Minneapolis, Lileks is a blogger for his "The Daily Bleat" (http://www.lileks.com/bleats/). He tells readers not to take his columns seriously.

Most writing experts say that writing humor is among the toughest types of writing to master. Because humor writing has this reputation, few people try it and, of course, even fewer succeed. Such success requires basic hard work. Yes, you must have

something funny to say, but you must also have wide-ranging experiences and unique perspectives to make it work.

Among periodical and book publishers, humor can be big business, too. There is intense competition for the truly successful humor writers and editors, and publishers are constantly searching for new voices with talent. Some of the most popular humor writers are also stand-up comedians or cartoonists. Look at the humor section of any local bookstore and you see dozens of humor books and collections of humorous essays by writers and comedians such as those discussed above. Many humor writers develop their writing skills with small publications and work up to major newspapers and magazines, social media, and then to books. However, some humor writers begin their careers as standup comics or television writers, and then try their hand at writing for newspapers, magazines, blogs, social media, and books. Writing around the world has a rich tradition of people with the ability to entertain and make readers laugh.

"From Artemus Ward and Mark Twain to James Thurber and Peter De Vries, American popular literature has been plentifully supplied with humorists," wrote *Publishers Weekly's* Robert A. Carter (1990, p. 24). "And in publishing there's no doubt that humor is a serious business." Much of the success of both a writer and the publisher depends on luck and timing, many experts say (Dahlin, 1992). "More than any other genre, humor is a fragile contraption. Tricked out in cartoons, amusing essays, or cheeky one-liners, what's funny to one person is stupid, offensive or utterly mystifying to another," Robert Dahlin (1992, p. 23) wrote in *Publishers Weekly*. The author, however, not the subject, ultimately sells humor, Dahlin observed.

Entire books are devoted to techniques for writing humor. However, this chapter shows you the basic elements of writing funny stories, columns, essays, and other material. Although humor can be both fiction and nonfiction, spoken or written, this chapter's focus is on humor based in nonfiction. Although you might not become the next David Sedaris or Dave Barry, this chapter discusses techniques and writing devices central to writing humorous feature content—stories, essays, columns, and briefs and brights. It demonstrates how successful humorists have built their reputations—one funny word at a time.

Finding Humor in Real Life

Some of the funniest stories we find are not fiction. When we hear or read one, it might seem as if some very creative person just thought it up, but the best humor feature is what happens daily. Just keep yourself on alert for the possibilities.

Retired *New Orleans Times-Picayune* humor columnist Angus Lind used real stories and often asked readers to send along their humorous stories. His strategy worked because his readers called to tell him of their experiences. Lind used the best material for his Living section columns. He wrote a column looking at the unexpected success of the New Orleans Saints NFL team (the team was in first place with one of the league's best records at the time the column was published):

> *"I'm having this recurring dream and I'm having trouble dealing with it," the man lying on the couch was telling the shrink.*
>
> *"Every Sunday I sit in front of my TV set and the Saints keep winning and winning. It's terrible."*

"Go on," the man in the white coat said.

"Then on Sunday night I watch the late sportscasts on TV and all I see are happy locker rooms and players smiling and laughing. On Monday I open up The Times–Picayune *sports section and they've won again! Pete Finney says the Saints played their best game of the season against the best team they've played so far this year. I buy* USA Today *and there are more stories about the Saints than any other NFL team. I tell ya, I can't take it."*

"Continue, please," the doc said.

"It gets worse. Monday afternoon I take a break from work and ESPN's Len Pasquarelli says, "The Big Easy Bandwagon might need to be retrofitted for those heavy-duty shock absorbers, so crowded has it become in recent days." The New York Times' *NFL computer power ratings have the Saints the top-ranked team in the NFL—that's the whole league! I can't cope with this."*

"Please, keep going."

"I'm driving home and Buddy D says his wife, Peggy, wants to help him pick out what dress he'll wear when the Saints go to the Super Bowl. And Buddy's not laughing about the possibility anymore. Then I go to my bar to relax and have a few beers and gather my senses and guess what happens?"

"What?" asks the psychiatrist.

"Jim Henderson comes on with his weekly sports commentary. You know what his message to Saints fans is?"

"Please tell me."

"He says, 'If you care to throw caution to the wind, be my guest. The magic of 2000 is back. If there was ever a time to dream the impossible dream, this is it.' I tell you, doc, this is sheer agony. The next thing you know, we'll be on the cover of Sports Illustrated. *It'll be torture."*

"Why do you say that?"

"Because it can't last."

"Why can't it last?"

"You're new in town, aren't you?"

"Yes, I moved here from San Francisco."

"Don't say that word."

"But you beat them."

"That was this time. What about the next time?"

And so it goes as the city of New Orleans collectively tries to cope with its negative mentality on a voyage into infrequently chartered waters—a fast start with wins over some of the NFL's elite, a ton of promise, talent-wise, and incredible national media attention.

Coping with success isn't an art Saints fans have had many chances to perfect. We are experts at dealing with disappointment, but that other stuff is as rare as, well, a 22-point fourth quarter. Right now, while everything is copacetic, the fans—like the team—are week-to-week, cautiously optimistic. It's fun to look down the road and think, "What if?" But it's also scary. It's intimidating.

"There's definitely an uneasiness," said Fred Koenig, professor emeritus of sociology at Tulane University and a man who knows quite a bit about crowd behavior.

"You can sense it."

There are a lot of ways to look at what's happening before our very eyes, Koenig said. "In a lot of ways it's like the stock market when it was going up and up and you knew it couldn't last but how long would it? We've been through this before but this time I'm not sure what's going on. I left before the fourth quarter and at that time we couldn't stop anything the 49ers were running and Deuce McAllister was gaining about a yard a carry."

The fourth quarter, however, in no way resembled the third. "I'm thinking that this time it might be the real deal," he said. "This is such a contrast to last year—the morale of the team, the relationship between the players and the coach is different, this is a winning team and there don't seem to be any prima donnas or conflicts." So?

"It's kind of like fear of heights. When you're on a pinnacle and you're looking down from farther up than you've been before … well, it's easy to be apprehensive. We've never been to the Super Bowl and the playoff record is not good …"

So?

"We don't want to get hurt all over again. We're still bruised from past years," he said.

So?

"So you could look at this whole phenomenon like the fear of flying. We're all up in the air about this. Pick your own metaphor."

Any other thoughts?

"Yes. How in the world did we lose to Detroit?"

(Lind, 2002) (Reprinted by permission of The Times–Picayune Publishing Corporation. All rights reserved.)

New York humorist and college professor David Blum depends on his friends for writing ideas. He wrote this light-hearted description of the process:

One way I come up with ideas for columns is to bribe my friends. The arrangement I have worked out is this: If a friend comes up with a fully formed notion for a column that meets with my editor's approval, he (or she) gets a steak

> lunch at Sparks. The only restriction is that he may not make me feel bad by using witty euphemisms throughout the lunch, like 'That was a tasty piece of cow flesh' or 'I'm in the mood to do the horizontal hula.' If a friend's idea leads me to a column but isn't an idea in itself, then he does not get the lunch. If the friend says something funny that I use in a column as my own joke, then I tell him I will buy him lunch, but when the check comes, I tell him that I'd had the same idea myself.
>
> (Blum, 1990, p. 30)

Funny writing often takes advantage of unusual and ordinary experiences that come from a variety of directions. California State University at Sacramento Professor Shirley Biagi (1981) said humor writing depends on a writer's ability to form images and word pictures, along with the surprise or unexpected finish or resolution of the story. The strategy keys to building up to the end by taking a small step at a time to tell the story, allowing momentum to grow. By using a combination of little jokes, she said, you can then break the punch line. Writer J.K. Wolfe (1990) suggested there are four elements in telling humorous stories used by humorists. These elements are:

- funny opening
- colorful narration
- colorful characters
- concise plot

Writer Gordon Kirkland (2006) feels that humor writing does not have to be hard if you use the right tools. He says using surprise and exaggeration-embellishment, creating a sense of superiority, and comedic timing can make humor not so difficult to write. "Aside from those tools, the single most important thing to remember when writing humor is that you want to allow your readers to laugh with you, at you, and most importantly, at themselves," Kirkland (2006) says. "You are never truly successful as a humor writer until your readers can put themselves into the situations you are describing and laugh at how they see themselves in that role."

Tom Ladwig (1987), writing for the daily *Columbia Missourian*, told a simple funny story and let the compounding situations in the story do the job. The story was based on a series of incidents involving a Missouri couple who took a trip filled with strange, but true, incidents and coincidences. As Ladwig tells the story, it builds increasingly funny from the first step to the conclusion. His eye for a good story and his ability to retell it won Ladwig first place in the humorous column category of the National Newspaper Association writing contest. This is Ladwig's story:

> *This story is intended for those among us who think we've had a bad day. It doesn't seem to have one whit of historical significance, but it is a story that probably will be told and retold.*
>
> *Adam (not his real name) is a man of the cloth. He and his wife were missionaries for many years, and he now teaches in a bible college in southeast Missouri.*
>
> *For the first time in many years, they have weekends free. To enjoy them more, Adam purchased a small pickup and had a camper shell installed. They explore the Ozarks and occasionally help a fellow minister when he needs a Sunday off.*

They filled in for a colleague one Sunday last summer. They started home early Monday and passed one of those tourist attractions where you see all sorts of wild animals in a pseudo-natural setting.

It was early, and it seemed like fun so they drove in. After buying their tickets they saw all the animals they wanted to see from the safety of their pickup camper. As they neared the end of the road, they found a huge elephant standing in the middle. Adam, a calm man, edged the truck closer. The elephant didn't budge. Adam edged closer.

Possibly patience and prayer would have worked better, but Adam honked. The elephant did move. It sat down, right on the hood of the truck. The rear end of the camper went into the air and Adam, now in desperation, honked and honked. The proprietors came and sent for the elephant keeper who finally convinced his charge to leave. Of course the management arranged for the damage to be repaired and left Adam their business card with the insurance firm's telephone number. The motor still ran and Adam decided to limp home.

They had driven about 20 miles on the four-lane when they passed a wrecked car. Seeing there were other travelers assisting they drove on. Four miles down the road, a highway patrol car approached and as it came abeam, wheeled across the median and flagged them down with siren and lights.

The trooper approached and told Adam he was investigating a hit-and-run accident a few miles back and asked Adam how his truck came to be damaged.

Adam said: "Officer, you're not going to believe this. An elephant sat on my hood." The trooper said: "You're right, I don't believe it. Get out."

It took a while for Adam's story to check out. The trooper, a 20-year veteran, still shaking his head in disbelief, told them they were free to go.

By this time Adam's head ached. He asked his wife to drive while he rested in the camper. They made good progress. Adam's wife made a rest stop at a service station. Adam awakened and decided this was a good idea.

When Adam returned, he found the camper gone, his wife obviously thinking him still asleep in the camper. He walked to the highway and sat on the curb to plot his next move. While there, the same patrolman drove by. Seeing Adam, he stopped and asked: "What now?"

Adam explained. The trooper said he was going toward Adam's hometown and could drop him off. They took off and somehow arrived before Adam's wife and the pickup camper.

It was still daylight, and Adam, the keys to the house still in the truck, thanked the trooper and said he would just sit and wait.

It wasn't but a few minutes before Mrs. A turned into the drive. As she approached the house, she caught sight of Adam waving from the porch. She jerked her head violently back toward the camper. And while in the position, her battered pickup slammed through the garage door.

> *Fortunately, Adam's wife was not injured. And nothing unusual happened to Adam and his wife for the remainder of that day. Or since for that matter.*
>
> (Ladwig, 1987, p. 20) (Reprinted with the permission of the *Columbia Missourian*.)

The market for humor is ready and waiting for stories like Ladwig's because it is entertaining and an escape for readers from their day-to-day concerns. However, most publications do not want off-color or sexist humor. Taking shots at others, such as telling ethnic or racial jokes, is not going to be published by contemporary mainstream news media, either. So, a smart professional humor writer stays away from these out-of-favor subjects and approaches.

The late humor writer Patrick McManus (Finley, 1988), who prepared humor columns for *Outdoor Life* and *Field & Stream*, offered four suggestions for writing humor up to 1,500 words. First, he said the idea should be covered by a single theme. Second, develop the characters. Third, list the bits of humor – the jokes, in other words – you can fit into your prescribed length in words. And last, start writing and rewriting frequently. Concentrate on the lead, he recommended, because it is often the hardest part. McManus said you should make it funny to alert readers that the piece is funny.

The best humor writers employ several different techniques when writing humor. These are most often in the form of satire, parody, exaggeration, contrast, understatement, asides, irony, grammatical and typographic emphasis, puns, and logic-internal consistency. These assist humor writers in achieving their goal of entertaining readers.

Satire in Humor

Writers often ridicule a subject's vices, excesses, abuses, follies, or stupidities. This is satire. This form of criticism is perhaps one of the most widely used in contemporary humor writing. When someone prominent is caught in the act, perhaps drinking a little too much, using an illegal drug, or otherwise breaking the rules, and the story is reported in a serious way, it does not take long before humorists take the poor victim's mistakes as fair material for their writing. Satire often becomes the approach used to criticize a gun-toting leading citizen who takes a position for gun control, for example. Portraying the individual as using his weapon to protect himself against overly aggressive children who want their weekly allowances might get the point across.

Dave Barry often uses satire in his work. One example made fun of a recent literary trend. In a feature for the front page of the *Miami Herald*, Barry wrote about a movie being made in South Florida and his moment with the stars:

> *So I've been hanging out with Owen Wilson and Jennifer Anniston.*
>
> *Really. We were at this major party in South Miami the other night. It went for more than five hours, with people and drinks everywhere. Owen and Jen were great. They had a baby. In fact, over the course of the evening, they had three babies, because there were problems with the first two.*
>
> *Actually, the babies weren't theirs. And it wasn't a real party. The ice cubes in the drinks were made of plastic. It was a scene for the movie* Marley and Me, *which is being filmed partly in South Florida.*

> Marley and Me *is of course based on the book by John Grogan, a newspaper columnist who wrote about his experiences with his dog, Marley. I want to state for the record that I am not a bit jealous about the fact that Grogan's book has sold 438 billion copies. This does not bother me at ALL.*
>
> *I mean, sure, I also wrote many columns about my own dogs, and I never got a huge bestselling book out of them. But that is my own fault. Grogan, in his writings, strikes a resonant chord with dog-lovers by making two fundamental points:*
>
> - *Dogs can be rambunctious, wild, and sometimes destructive. But underneath it all, they are loyal, loving creatures with hearts of gold.*
> - *Whereas my dog columns had a slightly different thrust: Dogs can be rambunctious, wild, and destructive.*
>
> *But underneath it all, they have the intelligence of seaweed ….*
>
> (Barry, 2008, pp. 1A, 6A)

Barry also has poked fun at novels written by lawyers, such as those by John Grisham, Scott Turow, Richard North Patterson, or Lisa Scottoline, and the amazing popularity such "blockbuster legal thrillers" enjoy. Barry not only satirizes the mystery genre, but he also takes shots at the people who read such books. His article was written as a mini-novel satire structured as a best-selling novelist might write one of his or her books. Ultimately, Barry takes all attorneys to task for their inability to communicate effectively in writing. Barry produced his own "blockbuster legal thriller" for his loyal readers. Here is how it began:

> *"Ohhhhhhh," she cried out. "OOOHMIGOD."*
>
> *"I'm sorry," I said, "but that's my standard hourly fee."*
>
> *Like most people, I can always use an extra $7 or $8 million, which is why today I have decided to write a blockbuster legal thriller.*
>
> *Americans buy legal thrillers by the ton. I was in many airports over the past few months, and I got the impression that aviation authorities were making this announcement over the public-address system: "FEDERAL REGULATIONS PROHIBIT YOU FROM BOARDING A PLANE UNLESS YOU ARE CARRYING* THE CLIENT *BY JOHN GRISHAM." I mean, everybody had this book. ("This is the captain speaking. We'll be landing in Seattle instead of Detroit because I want to finish* The Client.*")*
>
> *The ironic thing is that best-selling legal thrillers generally are written by lawyers, who are not famous for written communication. I cite as Exhibit A my own attorney, Joseph DiGiacinto, who is constantly providing me with shrewd advice that I cannot understand because Joe has taken the legal precaution of translating it into Martian.*
>
> (Barry, 1993, p. 27)

Barry also uses satire in his account of a lunch date with legendary actress Sophia Loren. It is a classic Barry treatment that his readers love so much. Barry got to take this peek at the world of the rich and famous and, of course, tell his readers about it in his unique style. He uses satire – he makes fun of himself by writing that he was "working" when he lunched with the movie star (and a lot of other people). He satirizes the lifestyle of the luxury residential complex that the luncheon event and the actress promoted. He pokes fun at the free food and champagne, the high prices of the exclusive apartments, the press kit descriptions, and even the eager and fawning press itself. When it comes time for him to ask the legendary actress a question, he asks her about cockroaches in her own luxury apartment at the complex. Here's Barry's (1986) article:

My original plan was not to have lunch with Sophia Loren. My original plan was to eat a chicken salad sandwich, then go pick up my son at kindergarten. In fact, I had actually purchased the chicken salad sandwich at the Miami Herald *cafeteria when a person in the Business Section asked me if I wanted to have lunch with Sophia Loren. "Sure," I said. This kind of thing happens all the time in the news game.*

So I called my wife. "Could you pick up Robby?" I asked. "I'm going to go have lunch with Sophia Loren."

"Sure," she said, in a sweet and kind and totally understanding voice. She will get even.

The reason I was invited to lunch with Sophia Loren was that she was promoting something. Somebody is always promoting something in the news business, and it is our job, as communications professionals, to go and find out what it is, even if this means eating a lot of free food. In this case, Sophia Loren was promoting something up in North Dade called "Williams Island," which, according to the press packet, is "a luxury, 80-acre island resort residence community on protected waters just off the Intracoastal Waterway." It's very nice. I would recommend Williams Island as a potential residence for anybody, whether he had $250 million or just $245 million. No, seriously, the brochure says they have "residential offerings" there starting at a very affordable $180,000, which I bet you could round up just by walking around and picking up the money that blows off the balconies of the nicer units.

One of those units is occupied, when she's in town, by world-famous raving beauty movie actress Sophia Loren, who also does promotional work for them in exchange for money. (Yes! Even Sophia Loren!)

We had lunch at the restaurant on Williams Island, the Island Club. They have a new kind of Very Trendy food there called "tapas," which also was being promoted. According to Richard Lamondin, director of marketing and sales for Williams Island, "The Tapas Experience is now one of the North American rages."

So we media people all sat down at our assigned tables and had the Tapas Experience, which consists of eating things off little plates. I thought they were great, except this one plate that I swear to God had a small dead octopus on it. Probably it was a prank. Probably back in the kitchen, they said: "Look what Lester found in the protected waters just off the Intracoastal Waterway! Yuck!

Let's see if the news media will eat it, because it's free food!" After the Tapas Experience, they served us lamb chops, during which Sophia Loren herself came over to our table and sat down to chat with us personally.

You ladies have heard, of course, that Sophia Loren is very, very beautiful, especially for a woman of 51, but let me tell you something: When she is up close, when you really get a look at her, she is Beyond Perfect. I'm sorry, ladies, but there you have it. Genetics. If it makes you feel any better, there is probably some area in which you are superior to Sophia Loren, such as playing the accordion.

So after we had just looked at her for a minute, we asked her some questions. This is where I would hate to be a famous movie actress, because she got asked, for example: "Is there any message you would want to give to the women of the world?" Think about that. There you are, trying to eat your lamb chop, and you have to come up with a message for the women of the world. I know if it was me, I'd blow it. I'd say something like, "Well, they should floss their teeth." But Sophia Loren, she was very poised. She said she felt the women of the world should be generous. She came up with that right off the top of her head.

I had given careful thought to what question I would ask her. I wanted it to be the kind of question you, my readers, would want to ask in the astoundingly unlikely event you ever had a personal lunch with Sophia Loren.

"Have you found any large insects in your apartment?" I asked.

"Insects?" she said.

"Cockroaches," I said. "They get huge down here." I held my hands about a foot apart, so she'd get the idea.

"Not yet," she said.

So there you have it: an exclusive interview with the lovely Miss Sophia Loren at her South Florida residence, the luxurious and cockroach-free Williams Island. If you want my opinion, you all should head over there as soon as possible and try the tapas and maybe purchase yourself a residence offering. And I don't say this just because they gave me a lot of free food. I say this because they also gave me champagne.

(Barry, 1986 p. 1B) (Reprinted with permission of Dave Barry.)

Parody in Humor

Parody is another one of the trendy humor approaches. Subjects vary widely, but parodies are popular with contemporary readers. Parody is the best approach for some humor. At times, there is an opportunity to imitate the style of an individual, place, object, or institution. This is basic parody. To do parody well, you must study the subject about which you plan to write. Popular subjects in recent years have been preppies, yuppies, middle-class lifestyles, and politicians and political campaigns. Once you have mastered the characteristic style of the subject, you take a nonsensical approach to it.

This works best with serious subjects such as political leaders or revered institutions. For example, a local humor columnist might use parody to write about a local public official that made a bad political decision or squandered public resources. *National Lampoon, Mad,* and the French *Charlie Hebdo* magazines have used parodies for many years with great success. They take the form of stories, jokes, cartoons, and polemics.

How Humor Columnists Make Humor Work

The late Bowling Green State University emeritus journalism professor F. Dennis Hale (1999) analyzed the techniques of America's most successful humor writers. Hale determined that there are 10 primary devices and techniques:

- Exaggeration
- Understatement
- Long lists
- Short lists
- Surprise
- Life's little problems
- Humor in the news
- Constructing a comic reality
- Attractive beginnings and endings
- Puns and word play

Exaggeration in Humor

Exaggeration is common in telling funny stories – writers enlarge, distort, and overemphasize to make a point. Although the size of the cockroach on your kitchen table might not be quite equal to that of your Irish Setter, it makes the point better when you stretch the fact a little. This emphasizes your perspective and conveys to readers that the insect in your kitchen really did scare you into jumping onto a chair and causing you to cry out for help. Remember that when you make a point using a technique like exaggeration, you make a promise to have a reason for it. Exaggeration and overstatement for nothing more than the purpose of overstating often do not work.

Denver resident Connie Willis writes humor as an award-winning science fiction author. It might sound like an odd combination, but she uses the same techniques as nonfiction humor writers. One of her favorite tools is exaggeration, a tool she calls "the cornerstone of comedy" (Willis, 1996, p. 32). She said to use exaggeration, writers must start with the truth. "You must know when to stop, because bigger and wilder and more ridiculous aren't necessarily funnier," Willis wrote (1996, p. 33).

Exaggeration can be used on yourself as a subject also. Writer William P. Holton took himself to task for his bad work habits. He amusingly described in a column for *Writer's Digest* how he made up answers "that stretch the truth" when his wife

would call him from her job to ask how his writing at his home office was going (Holton, 1993, p. 6). Rather than tell her the truth about his writer's block, how he had not managed to finish (or even start) his household chores, and how he had nothing to show for a day's effort, he made his effort seem like more than it was. He used a "What I say" and "What I'm actually doing" approach. Here are three examples of his technique:

> *What I say: I'm cleaning up a few odds and ends.*
>
> *What I'm actually doing: Disassembling my five-box paper-clip chain because I want to try my hand at the tricky, tri-clip braid.*
>
> *What I say: I'm conducting some research.*
>
> *What I'm actually doing: Flipping the dial between Donahue, Oprah, and Geraldo.*
>
> *What I say: I'm just finishing up a chapter.*
>
> *What I'm actually doing: I'm three quarters of the way through the latest Stephen King opus.*
>
> (Holton, 1993, p. 6)

Contrast in Humor

Contrast can also be described as an incongruity. In using contrast, you establish a lack of harmony with the world; you show unreasonable and unsuitable situations. There are times when something that is expected, and routine becomes something completely unexpected and non-routine. For example, a story about a business trip that was well planned with hotel and rental car reservations, airline bookings, and other details turns into a series of humorous, unexpected situations when the realities of the trip begin. These could include an airline strike, a rental car breakdown, hotel reservations denied by the check-in clerk, and just plain bad timing (for example, you finally arrive at the hotel at 11:15 p.m., hungry and tired, but find out that room service closed at 11 p.m.).

Understatement in Humor

Like exaggeration, understatement works to create emphasis and reaction on the part of the reader. An intentional, softer comment will draw attention when it is contrasted with the expected. If, for example, you were referring to the real summer heat that the local readers know was 98°F with 80% humidity by saying, "It was a little warm outside yesterday," then you have understated the case dramatically and no doubt drawn a reaction from your reader.

Connie Willis feels understatement is as important as exaggeration in creating humor. And you can use them together, she believes. "Don't get the idea you must choose one or the other," she says (Willis, 1996, p. 33). "Humor is not a decision between More or Less. (Mark) Twain often uses understatement and exaggeration in the same sentence." The concern of writers, she noted, is when to use one or the

other. Every author, she observed, seems to use them differently. "Things are already funny; you're simply using exaggeration and understatement and whatever else to bring out the humor that was already there" (Willis, 1996, p. 33).

Asides in Humor

Many humor writers like to use asides – short messages in parentheses or other form in the narrative – to communicate with readers on a quasi-private level. This is a technique often used in acting that permits the actor to communicate only with the audience. In writing, humorists who use asides are attempting the same technique, as if to privately communicate with you (and not the editor). Just like that. You don't have to use parentheses all the time. Some writers prefer dashes "—" or other typographic devices to accomplish the same thing. Some writers will even use footnotes for the same effect. South Florida humorist Dave Barry is one contemporary who likes to use asides in his writing.

Irony in Humor

Like contrast, irony is a technique that employs contradictions through writing tone and subject. Irony focuses on the direct opposite of what is usual or expected. The outcome of the story is different from what is expected by readers. The distance between what happened and what should have happened or what is said and what is intended is irony. Writers using irony set up the story by leading the reader to expect one type of finish through a combination of circumstances or steps involving the principals of the story. Then the reader is stunned by the opposite or inappropriate conclusion of the episode. This technique is used often in writing short humorous items known as brights.

Grammatical and Typographic Emphasis in Humor

Some writers make points in their humor writing by intentionally overusing and abusing English grammar and typography. One such technique is overuse of exclamation marks (e.g., multiple exclamation marks after a word in the middle of a sentence or a string of typographic symbols such as "*@!©!#$%&!!@" to represent bad or strong language). Another is capitalizing improper nouns (e.g., a term such as Campaign Trail) used in generic references rather than specific contexts. These tricks draw reader's attention to certain words and terms in an extreme fashion and help place focus where the writer wants it. Some humor writers intentionally invent words or new usages of existing words when they cannot find the right word to express their feelings or actions (e.g., the seemingly endless different ways that the characters in the classic comedy film "Wayne's World" referred to what doctors commonly call "regurgitation"). These diversions from the ordinary uses of grammar are functional and help the writer as he or she tells the story.

Puns in Humor

For centuries, humor writers have used puns to earn a good laugh from readers. In recent years, it seems, puns have gained a bad reputation. However, this is not

necessarily the case; the use of puns may be the problem. Much of the value of the pun is in its use. A pun is a writer's device that uses plays on words to provide double meaning. One common use of puns by some contemporary humorists is in references to sex. No doubt you can think of countless puns you encounter in everyday conversation, reading, and your own writing.

Logic and Consistency in Humor

Logic is the science of correct reasoning and valid thought. Logic involves correct reasoning through induction or deduction. Some successful humor is based on its internal logic. Crazy behavior and absurd conduct by people make up much of modern American humor. But after everything else, the humorous story must maintain its internal logic. One way to do this is to begin a story with an absurd premise and keep that premise throughout as the story is told. Related to that is internal consistency. Changing the focus in the middle of a story will often hurt it more than help it. Wolfe (1990) called internal logic and consistency two of the major building blocks of humor writing.

Other Techniques in Humor

There are other techniques that humor writers use. For example, the late Pulitzer Prize winning political satirist Art Buchwald frequently used dialogue in his columns, creating fictitious conversations that might have occurred. Dave Barry also frequently uses real and imagined conversations. In fact, most humorists find dialogue to be an essential device for their writing and they use it often.

Brights, Quips, and Other Short Humor Items

Much humor published in newspapers, magazines, social media, blogs, Web sites, and other places takes the form of quite short, brief stories that fit in various places throughout the publication or online site. Some publications incorporate short humorous material into regular news or columns. These are collectively referred to as brights.

Some publications simply use these funny feature items as fill material when it is needed to complete a page or fill a specific space. *Reader's Digest* uses regular humor features that are collections of brights about different aspects of daily life. And they're very popular. Research at *Reader's Digest* shows these sections are among the most popular in the entire magazine. They can be lucrative also; *Reader's Digest* pays well for brights and other brief stories. These brights are typically amusing stories that offer, as Daniel Williamson defined them, "a humorous and unusual quirk" (Williamson, 1975, p. 117). These items can come from reporters on the police beat, the courts, meetings, or from callers.

Alexander (1975) said the main purpose of a bright is "to change the pace and tone of the newspaper, the magazine, or the broadcast. Being so short, a bright makes fine filler, fits anywhere to complete a page, round out the makeup of a section or fill out a broadcast. And in this process, brights accomplish their main purpose: they provide variety." (p. 30)

Quips are similar, just shorter forms. Quips are simply witty statements that use word play, such as puns, to get attention and reader reaction. Selma Glasser, a freelance writer and book author who has published many shorter humorous items in national publications such as *Reader's Digest* and *Good Housekeeping*, said quips are an easy way to get published. "I give simple words or phrases new sparkle, variety, energy, and meaning. Timely subjects act as dynamic idea generators, recognizable because of their relevance to topics of the day. Just being alert and observant can pay off." (Glasser, 1990, p. 16)

Quips and brights can be a gold mine for writers, Glasser (1992) believed. "The only qualifications are alertness, perseverance, and adaptability. The words are all in the dictionary. It's how we choose to 'doctor them up' that counts," she observed. "Be alert and ready to jot down inspirations. You can add your own touches, a new title, or interpretations later." (Glasser, 1992, p. 19)

Author and comedy writer Gene Perret (1987) said writing these short humorous anecdotes is easy and takes little time. It is quick writing, it is fun and a challenge, he argued. Brights are particularly popular with news services, which use them for both the newspaper wires and the broadcast wires. They are then used by editors, radio announcers, or television anchors as counterpoints to the day's usually serious news. The writing style dictates that these items use concise writing. The usual bright is a couple of sentences to a couple of paragraphs in length. Usually, this means fewer than 50 words, but no more than several hundred words.

With such short and funny items, structure is important. Brief and to the point leads work best for brights. They should be fast-moving and skeleton-like. Many briefs are written in inverted pyramid form, but some lend themselves to chronological writing. A strong lead and an even stronger ending dominate the structure. The best material goes last. There should be an unexpected outcome, a surprise finish. If readers expect one sort of resolution, the bright strikes them as funny because it does the opposite.

Brights have a "twist" as some humor writers explain them. This twist is the uncommon point of the story, the writer's statement about human nature. Alexander (1975) described the main characteristics of brights:

- Make fun of human nature and human errors
- Must have a news peg (be about someone and be recent)
- Situation should be unusual
- Must be cleverly written
- Item should end with a punch line
- Should be good transition elements

Some brights do not have a punch-line finish. Brights without a punch line must leave readers wondering why something happened, who was involved, or simply what happened. This is usually a finish forced on writers because no resolution is available. For example, did the man ever get his keys out of the car? Did the child get the ink off her face? Did the student pay the parking fine?

Finding brights is easy, Gene Perret (1987) believes. His advice is to review your own personal stories, to trade stories at gatherings, read a great deal and remember what you read, stay aware of what is going on in your community, and be alert of

what is happening around you. Brights, it should be added, should not be written with the solution in the lead. This spoils the effect for readers and destroys the value of the item. A well thought-out bright holds its best for last.

In addition, Louis Alexander (1975) recommended avoiding the inverted pyramid structure in writing briefs. You write a brief much like you tell a joke. Not all brights must be funny. If brights are not going to bring a laugh, they should draw out sympathy or another emotion. They can draw their reaction from the reader's intellect. Brights are not always time-bound. Some editors compile them for use in columns and other regular features. The entertainment value of brights, more important than the time element, yet a timely bright is even more valuable when it is available.

Perret recommended another approach – writing the bright backward. Begin with the ending when you write, then build toward that ending and be compact. The beginning, he advised, should be "a short explanation of why you're telling this story" (Perret, 1987, p. 29). The good bright writer is also a good reporter.

The funny story, as tempting as it may be, cannot invent facts or even stretch them for the effect the stretching might bring. Stick to the facts; good reporting helps get the facts right. *Reader's Digest*, founded in 1922, was one of the largest magazines in the United States with a circulation of about three million copies a month in 2020, but is also available globally through its international editions. Its global distribution of more than 10 million makes it the largest paid-circulation magazine in the world. Editors publish several dozen brights each month. In *Reader's Digest*, potential contributors are invited to submit material for sections such as "Offbase" (formerly "Humor in Uniform)," "All in a Day's Work," "Life in These United States," and "Laughter, the Best Medicine."

Comedy writer Gene Perret (1984) recommended three rules for submitting short humorous anecdotes, quips, and other similar material for publication:

- *Send your submissions in batches* – No less than five should be in each envelope you send, although you can submit as many as a dozen each time. Giving the editor a few to read through each time helps your percentages.
- *Send each anecdote on a separate page* – On each sheet, include your name, address, phone number and Social Security number (the last will help speed payment).
- *Neatly prepare all submissions* – Don't cut corners because it's "only" an anecdote. Be professional. Buyers don't want to read through handwritten or messy submissions.

Humor Columns

Humor columns are regularly scheduled efforts and a challenge to any writer. The requirements of columns force writers to prepare for standard length (around 800 to 1,000 words) and regular frequency (some are weekly, some twice a week, and so forth). Truly creative people can be funny on demand, but the challenge of humor columns is to be able to draw on that point of view and talent consistently. Writers have done this successfully and have attracted large national and international followings.

Dave Barry is one humor writing success story. Barry was on the staff of the *Miami Herald* for two decades, when he moved from a small daily in West Chester, PA, to join the staff of the *Herald's* Sunday Tropic magazine and the lifestyles and features department. Barry currently writes for the newspaper as a contributor and freelance writer. Much of his time is devoted to both non-fiction and fiction books. His numerous humor books fill a library or bookstore shelf, and he writes humorous fiction.

His success is based on real-life humor and a writing style that is unique and entertaining. For some writers, winning a Pulitzer Prize for commentary may be the highlight of a long career, but not for Dave Barry. When he was awarded the prize in 1988, he simply used it as a platform on which to explore new subjects, writing approaches, and even writing forms. He found new opportunities with his entry into writing a series of humorous novels that began with *Big Trouble*. His resume now lists more than 30 books. He writes about politics when a newspaper assigns him to cover the national political conventions or political campaigns, but he also writes about sports when a newspaper sends him to a Final Four or an Olympics Games. He is not afraid to take on the conventional and the unconventional, famous and infamous, or large city and rural town. And he occasionally writes serious and contemplative content for newspapers, exemplified by a somber one-year anniversary essay about the heroes on the jet airliner that crashed into a field in rural Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001. He sees his work as pure entertainment and he often makes appearances on television, radio, and the corporate and campus lecture circuits.

Although many humorists are syndicated and write from an independent base, major newspapers and magazines often have a humor columnist on staff. The most popular humorists have become syndicated, write blogs, and their readers have grown from regional to national and, in some cases, to international levels.

Difficulties of Humor Writing

It is worthwhile to remind you that humor writing is not easy. Most professional humorists agree and are often frustrated to even attempt to describe how they do it or how you should do it. Some say it cannot be taught. *Writer's Digest* columnist Art Spikol feels writing humor does not come easy. "It's hard to write humor. I can teach any half-decent writer to write a salable magazine article, but I can't teach anyone to write funny," he said. "That ability really comes from an inner voice, and that inner voice may not necessarily be there when you need it. After a few years of developing the muscle, you'll be able to flex it at will—but you'll never get that far if you're not somebody who thinks funny to begin with." (Spikol, 1986, p. 18)

Spikol is right. Writers need that certain unusual perspective on life to write quality humor. And you need a mind for it, as well – you must know your market and what makes it tick. If you write for a general audience, as most newspaper writers do, then you have a different humor challenge from those who write for specialized magazines or Web sites. Those who write humor for specialized magazines and Web sites know the "inside" issues and concerns in which inside jokes can be built. Humor is not, as Spikol acknowledged, written in a vacuum.

There is no substitute for grand creativity. A very imaginative individual has an edge in writing humor. Arizona State University professor and former *Miami Herald* reporter Stephen Doig wrote an inspired April Fool's Day hoax that displays this sort of approach. His story told readers that pigeon and snipe hunters had found a cache of weapons in the Everglades area west of Miami. The story was laced with hints, such as trick names and deliberate typographic errors (such as FBI spelled FIB), that it was a joke and sharp-eyed readers saw them. This was his lead: A couple of serious hunters who spotted a light flashing Morse code in the Everglades early this morning stumbled onto a cache of arms worth at least $411,987, according to puzzled authorities. (Doig, 1987, p. 1B)

The suggestion that pigeons and snipes were involved likely tipped off some readers. Another hint is in the amount of money. Did you notice that it is really the date? Topically, the hoax was perfect for South Florida readers at the time because the ruse involved possible drug smuggling, weapons, and the mysterious, swampy Everglades. The subject and presentation as a "straight" news story on the front of the local section misdirected readers into thinking the story was serious news. For those who read the story but did not catch on, the newspaper ran a second story the following day that explained the little April Fool's joke (Every fool, 1987). Doig's genius in creating this article with its numerous tricks and other devices made the article a success. It was amusing, entertaining, and clever. Readers appreciate such efforts and respond.

Although well-known humor writers get the best publication breaks, it is not impossible for those just getting started. You might want to start at a low-pressure level by writing humor when you are inspired to be funny. By writing infrequently and thinking small in the beginning, you gain confidence one step at a time. Small newspapers, such as your community or neighborhood weeklies, and small magazines or newsletters are easier markets to crack. David Sedaris and Dave Barry did not become successful overnight. Their careers developed slowly and methodically from local levels into national superstar levels.

Once success as a humor writer is achieved, it must be maintained through steady hard work. Inspiration, as Dave Barry told *Writer's Digest* writer Marshall Cook (1987), is not enough if you make a living off the writing. "I write seven days a week," Barry said (Cook, 1987, p. 29). "If I don't write, I feel guilty. There's real work out there, and I'm not doing it. The least I can do is write."

A Humorist's View of Funny Writing

San Francisco Bay area writer and humorist Alice Kahn likes to joke around when it comes to writing humor. The nurse-practitioner and writer has published numerous books and newspaper columns based on her sarcastic views of daily life in Northern California. She's credited with popularizing the term "yuppie" to describe young urban professionals and "Gourmet Ghetto" to describe an influential Berkeley neighborhood. She is an entertaining, quotable, and memorable writer and offers lots of sound advice to young writers:

> I am often asked: "Alice, how can I join the exciting and glamorous world of article writing and hardly work at all and make tons of money?" There are several foolproof methods of achieving this goal. The most common are the sleaze dig, the trend invention and the integrity-ectomy. Let me give you an example of each.

Recently a young woman called me and asked if she could interview me for a story she was writing for her journalism class. It was a profile of John Raeside, editor of the *East Bay Express*, the paper where I got my break. She asked me many probing and interesting questions about the influence of Raeside on my oeuvre. I was only too happy to go on at length about how much my old editor had encouraged me, how lucky I have been to work with supportive editors, the importance of including the writer in the editing process, etc. Obviously, time had glossed over whatever battles we had had, because I couldn't recall a single fault in my former editor other than his being born with the genetic defect of frugality.

After she asked me about Raeside's particular qualities, we got to the hidden agenda. "How long have you known him?" she asked. "About six years," I answered. And, lifting her shovel for the sleaze dig, she said, "And did you have what we might call a personal relationship?" "Are you asking if I slept with him?" "Just trying to dig something up," she said.

Now, I could understand, if she were interviewing me in person, how she might think a swell-looking babe like me would have no other way of succeeding than by sleeping with editors. But this was a phone interview. I don't know what they're teaching them in journalism schools these days, but they'd better get one thing straight: "Bay Area Writer Sleeps with Editor" is not going to have the same market potential as "Liz Taylor Found in Pat Robertson's Love Nest."

Within hours of my conversation with the student journalist, I got a call from an experienced writer who is on the staff of a major metropolitan newspaper. She asked me if I could give her some 'quotes' for a story she was doing. You see, she was on deadline, so she didn't want to have a discussion. Just gimme some quotes and keep your stinkin' ideas to yourself. She said she was writing something about yuppie despair. She had a major trend going. That is, she had three yuppies that were willing to be desperate – on the record. Now she needed something from me as an expert on yuppies. I had written three articles on yuppies. I was an expert. I said three things. Those became three quotes. A trend was born.

When the final call of the day came, I realized I needn't write any more. I could just fill requests. The person wanted to know what I thought of something or other. He was writing an article that consisted of nothing more than calling up other people and asking them what they think of something or other. He didn't even have the integrity to dream up a trend or fantasize someone's weird sex life.

Now, we here at The Alice Kahn Column consider ourselves a full-service agency. We are only too happy to oblige the readers by providing them with further information about the important subjects covered in this column. But I am serving notice on all writers of articles in search of a point that if you want me to pop open your idea, it's gonna cost you. Henceforth, a 10% surcharge will be added to your bill for intellectual corkage.

(Personal communication to author, October 17, 1988)

Chapter 19

Science and Technology Features

We have heard it many times in recent years. The global COVID-19 pandemic that began in early 2020 changed everything. Life will not the same as it was before the pandemic. We are now different. We have seen countless news and feature stories about the pandemic, its growing toll on life in general, changing and evolving public health policy, and on possible solutions. In the United States, the public health debate was often about following or not following the science. It remains so. And there are the many feature stories about the human side of the pandemic. These continue, years into the pandemic, with feature stories often focusing on those coping with long COVID, taking new vaccines, treating children, and other subjects. This is science feature writing at its best. Fortunately for news consumers, writers rose to the occasion to tell us about the sick, their family members, and the caregivers who spent so many days helping the suffering patients who needed it most. We remember the painful stories about the ill and dying elderly in nursing homes who could not be visited in the pandemic's earliest days. And the heart-wrenching features about nurses and doctors and their facility administrators who searched for resources such as intensive care beds, protective coverings and clothing, and even facemasks when they were in short supply. And how some fell ill and died trying to protect and aid others.

The New York Times staff of reporters, writers, and editors took on the pandemic and its horrific impact on New York metropolitan area in the first months of the spread in early 2020. *The Times* used news stories, feature stories, and photographs and multimedia content to show its readers the impact of the pandemic. It did not just focus on the loss of life in those first months. The stories told of unequal racial and economic factors in treatment and care, and failures of governments in the U.S. and beyond its borders, and it tried to present public data for a better understanding of the risks to everyone. The effort won the newspaper the prestigious gold medal Pulitzer Prize for Public Service in 2021.

Beginning in early January, stories began to tell of a mystery illness spreading in China and then, within two months, stories told readers of the spread to the New York City metropolitan area. Some of the stories were multimedia and database built. Others were humanized looks at those fighting the spread. By June of 2020, stories appeared about how the virus spread without symptoms, leading to misleading and contradictory claims in opposition to the science, and how that made fighting the virus challenging. One early summer story by writers Matt Apuzzo (out of Brussels),

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Selam Gebrekidan (out of London), and David D. Kirkpatrick (in London) shows how this was done by focusing the beginning of their story on one scientist:

> *MUNICH—Dr. Camilla Rothe was about to leave for dinner when the government laboratory called with the surprising test result. Positive. It was Jan. 27. She had just discovered Germany's first case of the new coronavirus.*
>
> *But the diagnosis made no sense. Her patient, a businessman from a nearby auto parts company, could have been infected by only one person: a colleague visiting from China. And that colleague should not have been contagious.*
>
> *The visitor had seemed perfectly healthy during her stay in Germany. No coughing or sneezing, no signs of fatigue or fever during two days of long meetings. She told colleagues that she had started feeling ill after the flight back to China. Days later, she tested positive for the coronavirus.*
>
> *Scientists at the time believed that only people with symptoms could spread the coronavirus. They assumed it acted like its genetic cousin, SARS.*
>
> *"People who know much more about coronaviruses than I do were absolutely sure," recalled Dr. Rothe, an infectious disease specialist at Munich University Hospital.*
>
> *But if the experts were wrong, if the virus could spread from seemingly healthy carriers or people who had not yet developed symptoms, the ramifications were potentially catastrophic. Public-awareness campaigns, airport screening and stay-home-if-you're sick policies might not stop it. More aggressive measures might be required — ordering healthy people to wear masks, for instance, or restricting international travel.*
>
> *Dr. Rothe and her colleagues were among the first to warn the world. But even as evidence accumulated from other scientists, leading health officials expressed unwavering confidence that symptomless spreading was not important.*
>
> *In the days and weeks to come, politicians, public health officials and rival academics disparaged or ignored the Munich team. Some actively worked to undermine the warnings at a crucial moment, as the disease was spreading unnoticed in French churches, Italian soccer stadiums and Austrian ski bars. A cruise ship, the Diamond Princess, would become a deadly harbinger of symptomless spreading … .*
>
> (Apuzzo, Gebrekidan & Kirkpatrick, 2020)

Science should be important to all of us. While readers may not understand it, they need to know about it and how it impacts their lives. There are many public health, climate-change, and environmental-impact features to write that help tell the story of a changing world. For example, we must give continued attention to how environmental pollution affects our daily lives. Water. Air. The ground we walk and build on. The shrinking forests of the Amazon. The slow death of the oceans.

Los Angeles Times science and environment writers Kenneth Weiss and Usha Lee McFarling and photographer Rick Loomis (2006) published a five-part series that

described the poor condition of the oceans caused by toxins, pollution, chemical imbalances, and numerous other problems. The series caused a considerable reaction on the part of readers and served to educate Southern California about the condition of the Pacific Ocean and the world's other oceans and seas.

The series earned the team a 2007 Pulitzer Prize for explanatory reporting. Their work, using a feature approach by humanizing the issues and problems, exemplifies what new technology and science journalism strives to achieve. They took a complicated and complex subject of enormous scope and reported and wrote their stories in a manner that readers could understand. By telling the story from the perspective of individuals impacted by the change in the ocean near Los Angeles, readers could quickly grasp how the issues affected them. In the third part of the series, for example, Weiss described the impact of dark, dirty-appearing water and the odors of the winds from toxic algae blooms in coastal waters of Florida and how they changed the lives of individuals living nearby.

Environmental reporters, science beat writers, and other news and feature writers who focus their work on science and technology can write about some of the most exciting times in world history, but they also face the challenge of making very complex subject matter understandable. Whether it be the oceans, tainted foods, or new technology tools to improve our daily lives, there are stunning changes and advances in science and technology each year. Think about the newest developments in medicine such as the COVID-19 vaccines and other medicines. Cloning, once a dream of science fiction writers, is now a daily reality in animal science. Its impact on agriculture and other areas of our lives grows daily. Exploration of space still seems exotic, but people other than astronauts are now entering space and routine life on Earth changes regularly in subtle ways because of space exploration. And the high definition full-color images of the universe in distant space by the new James Webb Space Telescope first appearing in 2022 captured the imagination of those around the world who saw them.

There are many stories to be written that will help the "gee-whiz" world of science and new technology make sense. The stories must be accurate, but also informative, interesting, and entertaining. The Council for the Advancement of Science Writing (2003) noted the importance of this type of writing: "Science writers not only must meet daily challenges of accurately translating the often arcane and complex news of such discoveries into lay language. In many cases, their reporting must also attempt to objectively put those discoveries into historical, personal, political, economic, and social context." For example, while science writers have traditionally been faced with balancing the conflicting opinions of scientific experts, and we saw this often with COVID-19 science in 2020 and 2021, they must now include the influence of potential financial implications of scientific discoveries in their reporting equations, especially in biotechnology.

Writing about new developments in science and medicine to the public at large can be one of the most exciting and fascinating "beats" for any news organization. Overwhelming amounts of false or simply faked information on social media and other online sites don't make the work any easier. Unlike reporters on other assignments, science, and new tech writers seldom write the same story twice. Just as each scientific development is a discovery of something the scientists had not known before, each science and new technology story is about something neither the reporter

nor his/her reader knew before. Science writers cover some of the most momentous events in human history. Science writers were the first to tell the public of the splitting of the uranium atom and of the consequent explosion of the first atomic bomb.

Science writers also covered the discovery of antibiotic "wonder drugs," the first human heart transplant, the launchings of the first artificial satellites, the discovery of the structure of DNA, the first unmanned explorations of other planets, the first genetic engineering experiments, the identification of all human genes, the first cloning of an animal, the discoveries of neutron stars, pulsars, and black holes, and the human landings on the moon that helped unravel the history of the solar system (Council for the Advancement of Science Writing, 2003).

Writing about science, new technology, and other "nerdy" subjects such as medicine and public health can be doubly rewarding. You can provide an educational service to readers who learn about the latest medical and engineering developments. This, in turn, helps readers to live more complete, enjoyable and fulfilling lives. Increasingly, this is a major role of the science feature writer in our society. Science and tech features can relate the human side of science to readers. It helps readers learn how science and its achievements can impact them. But for some reason, there has been a fear of science among many feature writers (Dahir, 1995).

The topics are often daunting for many feature writers, and the science is frequently difficult to sort out. Concern about COVID-19, with the ongoing mixture of rumor and fact, left the public confused over the truth about this virus and what to do about it. Mask or no mask. Vaccination or no vaccination? Governments around the world turned to the news media to help to disseminate the known facts about coronaviruses and their variants and to educate the public about how to avoid the fatal pandemic. These public health information campaigns depended in part on science writers and medical writers to get the word out. Citizens are generally better informed about COVID-19 and its prevention today but still turn to the news media for the latest developments, such as new variants and vaccines, in the prevention and treatment of the disease. The public's dependence on the news media for such valuable information underlines the significance of science and health feature writing. Through news stories, and through feature articles about the people behind medicines and treatment, the public is educated and better served.

There is an equal concern today about climate change and the global environment. Environmental writing has become an important specialization. Numerous publications have full-time staff writers who cover the environment and others use freelance stories on the subject. For many communities, climate change and protecting the local environment is a critical part of their lifestyles and economies. Consider the importance of the Rocky Mountains region to states like Colorado, Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, and Utah, which have enormous resources devoted to outdoor recreation and tourism. Or consider the value of a stable and safe environment for the marine life, oceans, and the residents of the Florida Keys, the chain of islands and fragile coral reefs southwest of Miami.

Reporters, feature writers, photographers, graphic artists, and editors at the *Times-Picayune* in New Orleans understand the importance of the natural environment surrounding their city, the rest of Louisiana, and the entire Gulf Coast. The newspaper's team of journalists began to investigate the diminishing quality and supply of fish in their region. The result was an eight-day series of 40 news and feature stories

that was titled "Oceans of Trouble." The stories told readers about conditions that threaten the world's supply of fish and how a way of life that developed over several generations had been endangered by careless treatment of the ocean. Overfished waters, polluted spaces, commercial and sport fishing, industry, business, and residential development, and other forms of human intervention, they wrote, had broken an ancient rhythm of the seas. The package of stories looked at the entire Gulf of Mexico region, from Texas to South Florida. The staff earned the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for Public Service for this important science feature series in 1997.

New Digital Technology and Science Features

There is often confusion involving science writing, technical writing, new technology writing, and scientific writing. These are each different types of communication about science, English Professor Robert Gannon has noted. "Science writing is often confused with technical writing and scientific writing. It is neither. The difference lies mostly in the audience. The technical writer prepares 'technical' material—reports, memos, and brochures—for a captive audience that needs data: a client, a colleague, or an organization. A scientific writer, preparing scientific papers, writes for readers who want the information—many of whom are in the discipline and must keep abreast of what's happening. But the science writer (or science journalist) addresses the lay public. This job is much more complicated. The science writer must make complex theories and systems clear to a large, diverse readership, and must do so with the utmost clarity, accuracy, and excitement" (Gannon, 1991, p. v).

Some publications have reporters and writers assigned to specific science and new technology beats. Among the most common beats are health and medicine, the environment, aviation and transportation, and energy. With the growing interest in science and high technology, major newspapers publish science and technology sections or pages on a regular basis. Some consumer magazines, with their well-defined markets, specialize in scientific content. Some are generally about science. They include top publications such as *Smithsonian, Discover, National Geographic, and Popular Science*. Other popular science magazines are *Nature, Scientific American, Archaeology, Audubon,* and *Science,* the official publication of the American

Science Writing Organizations

Science writers, at least as a group, have worked in a recognized specialty since 1934. That was the year the National Association of Science Writers (http://www.nasw.org) was founded in New York. There are numerous other specialty professional writers' groups who concern themselves with scientific material—groups such as the American Medical Writers Association (http://www.amwa.org), the European Medical Writers Association (https://www.emwa.org), and the Aviation–Space Writers Association. The Society of Environmental Journalists (https://www.sej.org) focuses on reporting and writing about the environment, energy, science, health, and the climate.

Association for the Advancement of Science. Although these consumer magazines are devoted to general science, there are other major consumer magazines devoted to health, personal care, and medicine. These include four of the top 100 magazines in the country, such as *Prevention, Men's Health,* and *Shape*. Technology magazines are popular as well. *Popular Mechanics* and *Wired* and online computer magazines such as *PCMag*. Many other magazines have departments devoted to medicine and health, space, engineering, the environment, and new technology.

Thus, you have probably deduced by now, science and technology writing is subdivided into numerous specializations. Some writers will handle the general science assignment as it comes up, but most try to develop their own specialties within the sciences because of the challenge of the subject matter. Basic feature writing and reporting skills are no different in science and technology writing than in other forms of feature writing. However, the growth in information and interest in science requires it be treated as a specialization of feature writing. Beyond the basics in writing and reporting, there is one critical difference. You must be able to gather this usually complex scientific information, digest and understand it, and then translate it into understandable information for the public. This requires a feature writer willing to accept this challenge and be able to overcome it. You must often cope with a vocabulary unique to a specific science.

You must also be able to write along a fine line that keeps well-educated readers interested without losing the less-sophisticated ones. It is always a difficult assignment. You must also be able to define and explain. It is critical to maintain accuracy in the use of unique scientific and technical vocabulary. Consider an article about DNA, for example. What is it and how does it impact on our daily lives? What are genes? Such words must be explained in your story; you must take the time and effort to define terms and then use them in precise fashion. What does the subject mean to the average person? How will the information in the story affect his or her life, or the lives of succeeding generations? This determination of meaning often is the most difficult challenge of all science and technology writing. Although you are faced with the challenge of writing about new scientific and technology developments that affect our lives, there is still another challenge. Writers must also be able to tell stories about subjects that readers already know about in a manner that is appealing and fresh. This may be more difficult for a writer than a story dealing with new developments. Making the old and familiar seem new is a tough assignment.

Need for Science and Digital Technology Features

Readers are searching widely for stories about new media and technology to learn what is in the market, how it is used, how to make the most of it, and make their lives easier with it. Writers who know about and can write interesting and helpful pieces about portable music devices, smartphones, noise-canceling headphones, Wi-Fi routers, personal computers, high-speed fiber Internet service, tablets, or multifunction color and 3D printers, for example, will sell and publish their work. It requires writers who have a strong background in technology, engineering, and science—or are willing to learn it—but they can turn this specialty into published articles with the right focus and approach.

Few people could have anticipated a global medical problem such as COVID-19. The first mainframe computer was developed during World War II, and desktop personal computers first came into public use in the 1980s. Manned flight itself is just more than one century old. It would have been hard for most scientists in the early 1940s to imagine an energy source that could be as inexpensive or as dangerous as a nuclear power. The list of these types of recent major scientific developments is endless. The developments continue, big and small. Extraordinary and ordinary. And we write about them. Recently, these stories have appeared in monthly magazines:

- *American Scientist*—3D printing of medical devices.
- *Popular Science*—The U.S. Air Force announces plans to test an artificial intelligence pilot on its cargo planes.
- *Time*—Why readers should care—a lot— about the James Webb Space Telescope images.
- *Smithsonian*—Four possible explanations to understand why the first human to receive a pig heart transplant died.
- *Wired*—A one-on-one interview with Volodymyr Zelensky discussing the war, the role of technology, and the future of Ukraine.
- *Scientific American*—Do Zoom meetings squash creativity?
- *Discover*—What species today are descendants of dinosaurs? The creatures walking the Earth today that are closely related to dinosaurs.

It is one of the news media's most important duties to provide the latest science and technology information to those who live in our communities. Certainly, writing about new developments that are lifesaving techniques, or simply just time savers, can be particularly satisfying for science writers.

"Writing technical articles is not only easy, but surprisingly enjoyable," noted Angela D. Mitchell tech freelance writer, short story author, playwright, and lyricist. "Your market is huge, you'll be able to submit your pieces to magazines on the local, regional, and national level, and you'll sometimes get a look at products far before most consumers will. You'll develop an enhanced appreciation for the ever-changing world of technological innovations" (Mitchell, 1997, p. 37).

Two Remarkable Writing Projects

Science writers educate. They explain. They alert readers to risks and ways to avoid them in everyday life. Mike Toner worked for two decades as science editor and science writer for the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. Since retiring, he has been a frequent contributor to *American Archaeology* magazine and *Archaeology* magazine. Toner (1992) wrote a startling six-part "occasional" series about the diminishing effects of pesticides and antibiotics entitled "When Bugs Fight Back." Explaining how insects develop resistance to chemicals in the human effort to eradicate them, Toner was able to teach readers about the science behind such work by making a complicated topic involving chemistry and biology easy to understand. He interviewed dozens of scientists and other experts. Toner illustrated the problem with numerous real medical cases and examples. He discussed the problem by reviewing its history and development. Toner's efforts earned him the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for explanatory

journalism and the JC Penney–University of Missouri Newspaper Feature Writing Award certificate of merit for a series. This is a significant portion of the first part, which ran about 3,300 words:

Editor's Note: The bugs are fighting back. And they are getting very good at it. The world's simplest creatures—bacteria, viruses, insects and weeds—are unraveling the chemical security blanket that has nurtured a half-century of progress in both public health and agriculture. First in an occasional series, "When Bugs Fight Back."

The death certificate attributed the 58-year-old heart patient's demise to "complications" following bypass surgery. The real reason made even his doctors cringe. Antibiotics didn't work anymore.

For four months, doctors at the University of Michigan Medical Center had struggled to control a bacterial infection that had invaded the man's chest cavity. The germs, however, were resistant to every available drug.

In the end, the bugs triumphed—and doctors at one of the country's premier medical institutions were as powerless to prevent it as doctors were 50 years ago, in the days before penicillin.

"If he hadn't had such a resistant strain, he would have made it," says Dennis Schaberg, professor of medicine at the University of Michigan medical school in Ann Arbor.

"I hate to sound like Chicken Little, but with certain micro-organisms, we are back to a point in time where we have no options left. It's tough to explain something like that to the family of the patient. Very tough."

A growing number of patients—and their families—are discovering a grim new reality of medicine in the 1990s. Antibiotics, those too-good-to-be-true compounds that have provided mankind with mastery over infectious disease, don't work like they used to.

The bugs are fighting back. And they are getting very good at it. On city streets, in remote jungle clinics, on the farm and in back yards, the world's simplest creatures—bacteria, viruses, insects and weeds—are unraveling the chemical security blanket that has nurtured a half-century of progress in both public health and agriculture.

Whether we are conscious of it or not, the ability of these mindless creatures to adapt to the chemical warfare we wage on them has become a significant force in our daily lives. Look closely at any infectious disease for which there is a cure and you'll find bugs with a cure for the cure.

Have a child with an ear infection that won't go away? Deep in the recesses of your toddler's middle ear, there is probably a resistant bug to blame.

Having trouble getting rid of Fido's fleas or the cockroaches under your sink? Chances are, they're resistant too.

Did your stomach tie itself in knots after your last trip to a restaurant salad bar? If it was food poisoning, chances are one in three that the bug you took home with you was resistant.

Like the villains in a late-night horror show, resistant strains of mankind's oldest enemies are finding ways to sabotage our most sophisticated technology. And even the malevolent microbes of "The Andromeda Strain" or the angry hordes of "Killer Bees" aren't as scary as the real-life "superbugs" that are now emerging throughout the world.

In U.S. hospitals, where most people go to get well, two million people a year get sick after they check in—and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that 60 percent of those infections are now resistant to at least one antibiotic. Because drug-resistant germs are twice as likely to be fatal, they contribute to 50, 000 hospital deaths a year. And because they take twice as long to cure, they add as much as $30 billion a year to the cost of hospital care.

The toll in hospitals, however, is only the most documented facet of an insidious trend. Resistant strains of some of man's oldest enemies—malaria, tuberculosis, gonorrhea, food poisoning, pneumonia, even leprosy—are undermining public health throughout the world.

Some new strains of tuberculosis, resurgent after 30 years of decline in the United States and Europe, have become resistant to so many drugs that they are virtually as untreatable as they were before the discovery of antibiotics.

Malaria, which claims at least one million lives a year in the tropics, is on the comeback trail too, bolstered by the malaria parasite's growing resistance to drugs, and pesticide resistance of the mosquitoes that carry it.

Even that familiar nemesis we call pneumonia, which claims more than 3.5 million lives a year worldwide—up to 50,000 of them in the United States—is becoming steadily more resistant to penicillin, which has controlled it for nearly 50 years.

Almost every human infection—from drug-resistant "superclap," which has become a worldwide problem, to stubborn staph infections that linger in nursing homes for years—is now resistant to at least one major class of antibiotics.

Tractor-Towed Blowtorches

Among the insects, things are no better. On Long Island, where the Colorado potato beetle is now resistant to every major class of pesticides, potato farmers use tractor-towed blowtorches to kill the insects—one of at least 17 "superbugs" that are now resistant to all pesticides.

Weeds are getting tougher too. More than 100 species are now resistant to at least one herbicide, and wheat growers in Australia and the United Kingdom are encountering the first multiply-resistant "mega-weeds," which scientists say could threaten the world's wheat supply.

Farmers' problems, of course, quickly become consumers' problems. The clouds of pesticide-resistant sweet potato whiteflies that devastated last winter's vegetable crops in California, Texas and Florida triggered supermarket sticker shock that gave us $3.50 cantaloupe and $2-a-pound tomatoes.

There is no great mystery about what is happening. The bugs, whether single-celled microorganisms or the six-legged variety, are doing what comes naturally. They're surviving.

Bacteria have been on the Earth for at least 3 billion years; insects for at last 850 million years. Like all living things, they are constantly mutating, testing new traits that may give them an edge in a hostile environment.

With a new generation of bacteria every 20 minutes, trial and error can be a powerful survival tool. And when one bug finds something that works, it passes it on, sometimes even to other species.

With eons to adapt, bacteria have learned to live in the Earth's most hostile environments—from superheated deep-sea vents to the frozen slopes of Mount Everest. The few thousand antibiotics and pesticides that mankind has thrown at them have been, by comparison, a minor challenge.

The bugs' subversion of man-made chemicals has been unwittingly aided by the industries that market them, by "experts" who overuse them, and by ordinary people who treat them as technological "no-brainers" that promise, for a time, to change the course of evolution.

"The problem is not chemicals; it's the irresponsible way they are used," says University of Illinois entomologist Robert Metcalf. "Our shortsighted and irresponsible use of antibiotics and pesticides is producing strains of monster bugs resistant to nearly everything in our arsenal. The outlook is dismal. And it is getting worse."

The benefits of the 20th century's chemical "miracles" are indisputable. In the decade after the introduction of antibiotics, U.S. death rates from pneumonia, TB and influenza dropped 50 percent. Worldwide, penicillin is thought to have added 10 years to life expectancy. And the heavy chemical use that fueled the Green Revolution has helped feed a burgeoning population.

Resistance is not a new phenomenon. The emergence in the 1940s of penicillin-resistant staph infections in hospitals and DDT-resistant houseflies proved that bugs could fight back.

Until recently, however, human ingenuity always pulled some new solution from technology's seemingly inexhaustible bag of tricks. Now, like an audience that has seen the magician's act before, the bugs are getting harder to fool.

In recent years, resistance has become so pervasive that some experts now fear medicine and agriculture are on the verge of regressing into the technological dark ages that preceded the era of antibiotics and pesticides.

The Ultimate Nightmare

For most people, for most illnesses, antibiotics still work. But in a growing number of cases, like the 58-year-old Michigan heart patient who died of mediastinitis caused by a hard-to-treat strain of enterococcal bacteria, the bugs' ability to accumulate resistance swiftly to several drugs at one time conjures up the ultimate nightmare.

"For some infections, we are very close to the end of the road," says Fred C. Tenover, the head of antimicrobics investigations for the CDC. "The worst-case scenario is almost here. We are very, very close to having bacteria resistant to every significant antibiotic ever developed. Only this time, there are no new drugs coming down the pike."

No aspect of the problem has dramatized the predicament more than the resurgence of tuberculosis—a disease that was once thought to have been vanquished by antibiotics. Although the numbers are relatively low—26,283 cases in the United States last year, 909 in Georgia—the upward trend and the growing prevalence of resistant TB worry many experts. A 50 percent increase in cases in Atlanta last year left the city with the highest TB rate in the country … .

(Toner, 1992, p. A1;
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Toner (1992), a graduate of the University of Iowa and Northwestern University, also developed a chart focusing on the "dos and don'ts of antibiotic use" for the first installment of the series. His other stories discussed the global spread of resistance, "tougher" germs in hospitals, how doctors and drug companies encourage resistance, the growing difficulty in controlling weeds and insects, and the dwindling supply of "magic bullets."

The excellence in former *Baltimore Evening Sun* feature writer Jon Franklin's two stories about a new brain surgery procedure is built through a detailed description of the complex operation on a 57-year-old woman. Franklin, a professor emeritus at the University of Maryland whose work has become a classic in science storytelling, used an approach he calls the non-fiction short story or creative non-fiction. This approach, applied to writing about science and other technical subjects, makes the material more appealing to readers. "The principal difference between the short story of old and the nonfiction short story of today is that in its modern form, the story is true," Franklin wrote (1986, p. 27).

The effort won Franklin his first of two Pulitzer Prizes, this one in 1979 for feature writing. Franklin began the short story-like article about the complicated surgical attempt to untangle and remove a knot of abnormal blood vessels in a woman's skull. He set up the dramatic conflict between the surgeon and what the patient called the "monster" internal growth that was slowly killing her.

In the cold hours of a winter morning Dr. Thomas Barbee Ducker, chief brain surgeon at the University of Maryland Hospital, rises before dawn. His wife serves him waffles but no coffee. Coffee makes his hands shake.

In downtown Baltimore, on the 12th floor of University Hospital, Edna Kelly's husband tells her goodbye. For 57 years, Mrs. Kelly shared her skull with the monster: No more. Today she is frightened but determined. It is 6:30 a.m.

> *"I'm not afraid to die," she said as this day approached. "I've lost part of my eyesight. I've gone through all the hemorrhages. A couple of years ago I lost my sense of smell, my taste. I started having seizures. I smell a strange odor and then I start strangling. It started affecting my legs, and I'm partially paralyzed.*
>
> *"Three years ago a doctor told me all I had to look forward to was blindness, paralysis and a remote chance of death. Now I have aneurysms; this monster is causing that. I'm scared to death—but there isn't a day that goes by that I'm not in pain, and I'm tired of it. I can't bear the pain. I wouldn't want to live like this much longer."*
>
> *As Dr. Ducker leaves for work, Mrs. Ducker hands him a paper bag containing a peanut butter sandwich, a banana and two fig newtons. Downtown, in Mrs. Kelly's brain, a sedative takes effect. Mrs. Kelly was born with a tangled knot of abnormal blood vessels … .*
>
> (Franklin, 1978, p. C–1)

Franklin proceeds to tell this dramatic story by using a chronological approach. Yet, readers do not find out what happened to Mrs. Kelly until the struggle ended seven hours later, on the operating room table. With detailed description, Franklin puts readers in the operating room as observers. He lays out Mrs. Kelly's story as a fiction writer might write a short story. As this real-life drama builds in his story, the condition of the patient is left hanging. At the same time, a very difficult medical procedure becomes understandable and meaningful to readers. It is not until the last sentence of the story that Franklin reveals what happened to Mrs. Kelly. "The monster won," Franklin simply wrote in that final sentence (p. C–1).

Why did Toner and Franklin succeed with their storytelling? Why did each win such high-level recognition? Each one has mastered science feature writing. Although the topics were different and the author approached each in a somewhat different manner, each told his or her story in a manner understandable for readers. Toner and Franklin succeeded because of their abilities to note details and take complicated subjects and write them in an accurate manner that could be understood by readers without medical backgrounds. For example, Franklin's (1978) article displays the uncertainty and tension surrounding any surgical procedure that risks human life, particularly the drama of a revolutionary technique.

The story is even more effective because of the humane approach – readers get to know the patient and the neurosurgeons because Franklin develops their roles in the story beyond just name and identification, like the character development in fiction. This type of science writing is sensitive and dramatic through its narrative description. It is a good read. That is what writing about complicated subjects should do—allow readers to learn from, and enjoy, the subject.

Writing Science and Digital Technology Features

Science and technology feature topics literally cover the universe. Some of the most popular topics include personal health, wellness, and fitness, nutrition and diet, medicine, digital technology, space travel and astronomy, psychology and psychiatry, sports and exercise science, geography and oceanography, archaeology, meteorology,

and biology. Any of these topics can be broken down into numerous subdivisions that are important topics themselves. In medicine for example, focus continues to be on pandemics and viral diseases, vaccines, drug abuse and addiction, cancers, paralysis, burns, heart disease, diabetes, children and childbirth, sleep, and sex.

It seems there are more subjects in science, digital technology, and medical and health writing than there are sciences. It is up to you as a writer to determine which of those subjects are marketable and appealing to your readers. You can be certain that subjects such as those already mentioned appeal across the board. Increasingly, publications are assigning stories about personal health, wellness, food and nutrition, and fitness subjects.

What does it take to be a science or technology feature writer? First, it takes some interest in any scientific subject such as those discussed so far. Second, it takes some education in the sciences. Those science classes that are part of a core college curriculum can and will be very helpful. In fact, perhaps a second major or minor would take building expertise a step further. It is not necessary to be a science major, but some general science education is very helpful. Third, it makes a difference if you specialize. This focuses your "learning curve" on a particular area.

The late Bill Steele, a Cornell University graduate who worked near the school in Ithaca, NY, began college as a physics major but wound up in psychology. He said he was more interested in people than things. Steele, who has written numerous articles as a freelance writer for national general interest magazines such as *Family Circle, Working Mother, National Wildlife, Popular Electronics,* and *Health,* as well as trade and business publications, specializes in medicine, computers, and more general science writing. He believed that his education was invaluable.

"In my work as a science writer, I drew mostly on the basic courses I took in the first couple of years. Today, I draw much more heavily on what I've learned since college. For example, when I was an undergraduate, there was no such thing as molecular genetics, yet today that's a subject I write about far more often than physics. I've made a point of becoming informed about it, and probably know more about it now than I know about physics. Or psychology. A good scientific education teaches you how to *do* science. To write about it, you need to know the basics, and the vocabulary, so you can understand what a scientist or engineer is telling you. You also need to be up on the state of the art, so you know what's news. After that you use the same interviewing and story-telling skills you use to report on business, law, sports or anything else: Here's the expert who knows what's going on and you have to find out what that is and ask questions or do research until you can explain it to your audience in terms they can understand," Steele, who was also a well-known folk musician in upstate New York, explained.

"The work of most science and technical writers is difficult to generalize about. Newspaper writers who specialize in science and technical writing many times have other duties. While a science writer for a small daily newspaper might focus on the medical beat, he or she might also have assignments to cover schools or city hall. Many science and technical writers for smaller consumer magazines work freelance and must be able to generate assignments on their own initiative and enterprise. This effort requires paying attention to developments by reading and talking to the leading information sources in the area," he said (Steele, personal communication to author, May 24, 2003).

The importance of the story's subject to readers and its entertainment value are among the reasons people turn to a science feature, research has shown (Shapiro, 1988). On the other hand, the same research indicated, readers will be turned off by difficult material that is hard to understand or a subject about which they know little.

Writing for an Appropriate Audience

You have an assignment. You must write about unhealthy levels of asbestos found throughout an old building on your school's campus. How much does your publication's average reader know about the complicated subject? How much do you have to explain and define as you write this article? You must make these types of decisions before you research or write one word. Your writing approaches will vary considerably – depending on whether you write for a general audience or a specialized audience.

General Audiences

Much of the science and technology writing you do in consumer publications, whether in print or online, is oriented to the general public. The wide range of educational levels puts a special demand on you to write in an interesting fashion for the reader with a professional degree as well as the reader who did not finish high school. But you must know as much as you can about this general audience because it might have special interests. For the general audience, it is best to err on the side of stating the obvious and too much explanation. You should remember that part of your work is educational, too. Writing for the general audience is not automatic. Translating complicated information into understandable form requires effort on the part of the writer.

Specialized Audiences

Some science and technology writing you may do is designed for a specialized audience of high sophistication. Feature writers for business and industry periodicals, for example, prepare their stories for readers with high-interest levels in the subject and, it is likely, with high knowledge levels as well. Most specialized audience readers have some experience with the subject themselves, either through their work or education. This expertise on the part of readers requires that you have an even greater awareness of the audience when you write. You do not want to make the mistake of assuming too little, and thus bore the reader. And you do not want to assume the audience knows too much and turn it off by leaving too many vague explanations or unanswered questions. Some preliminary research about your readers may help solve this problem.

Most editors have a particular audience and subject range in mind for each story they accept. For example, editors of *Smithsonian*, an international magazine with six million print readers and 11 million digital readers in 2021, published by the renowned Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, publishes to an audience that is 51% male, earns a median household income of $88,000, has 74% homeowners, is media age 60, and is 85% college educated (Smithsonian Media Kit, 2021). Its editors

take limited unsolicited stories but seek features for several departments of the magazine written about Phenomena & Curiosities (science and nature, natural history, recent scientific discoveries, and ongoing research), Points of Interest (unusual places and events in Americana), and Presence of Mind (opinion) (*Smithsonian* Magazine Writer's Guidelines, 2012). Many magazines publishing science features will post content guidelines for writers online and recent information about a publication's audience is usually offered in a market research summary in the media kit for advertisers.

Sources for Science and Digital Technology Features

There are dozens of categories of sources to be used in science and technology feature writing. Many times, writers will need to work with organizations and institutions and their representatives. This often means working with an intermediary such as a public relations spokesperson. They work with different titles, but all have one role, to serve as a buffer and representative to the news media and the public.

There is also a growing set of experts' directories available to journalists in either online or printed formats. Access to experts is best done directly to the source or his or her institution, but there are online resources for finding the right people for your story. Start with Web sites like Experts.com (https://www.experts.com). Using a professional organizations public membership directory is another strategy, but some professional organizations make those online lists available only to members with passwords. But it is worth trying.

There are a number of others developed by commercial enterprises that may be useful. One example of a commercial expert-finder service that has gone online is known as ProfNet (https://profnet.prnewswire.com). ProfNet, operated by Cision, provides sources of all types; its base is a link to information officers at universities, colleges, research institutes, and think tanks and that opens the door to scientists of a wide range of specializations. You need to open an account, establish your professional credentials, submit a query form expressing your story subject and the types of experts needed, and hope for a timely response. Account owners can also establish their e-mail preferences to see alerts and other information sent from the service.

Of course, the most direct way to reach experts is to go directly to their organizations and institutions. Again, this will likely require contacting a Media Relations or News office and talking with public relations representatives to determine the availability of people you need for your story. Calling or e-mailing an expert source directly may work from time to time, but don't expect much success. Representatives from organizations will maintain lists of experts willing to talk to writers and this screening will likely speed up matters.

Familiarize yourself with those people in the subject areas that interest you. Just take the time to look at their Web sites, social media pages, and blogs. There are numerous special handbooks, guidebooks, and directories available for reference. Many have been prepared for Web pages or as downloadable "pdf" format documents. Specialists in a field write many specifically for reporters and writers.

The Radio Television and Digital News Association (2020) prepared an online guide for journalists trying to understand all the data being released by the CDC and

other federal and state agencies during the COVID-19 pandemic. It explained terms such as vaccine efficacy, positive cases, hospitalizations, positivity rate, and recovered cases rates, and fatality rates. And it explained how these statistics were computed.

Similarly, the International Food Information Council Foundation in Washington, DC, prepared a 12- page booklet titled "How to Understand and Interpret Food and Health-Related Scientific Studies" for writers who cover the food and health industries (International Food Information Council Foundation, 2001). Journalists also prepare some of these types of resources for other journalists.

Many major events such as national conferences, meetings at scientific institutions, and announcements from commercial science and technology businesses are buffered by the public relations specialists or other media liaisons whose job it is to provide writers with controlled access to scientists, engineers, and technicians who have the expertise needed for your story.

Best Science and Digital Technology Sources Check List

Organizations, such as professional or trade associations
Web sites, social media pages, and blogs
Resource books prepared for the news media
Professional associations and trade group conventions and exhibitions
Professional meetings
Professional journals and newsletters
Bibliographic indexes and abstracts
Online access bibliographic database services
Business and industry publications
Universities and colleges
Research and technical institutes
Research groups and foundations
Museums and libraries
Commercial research organizations
Information hotlines

Scientific Journals and Other Publications

The literature of a particular discipline or field is the best place to seek out story ideas. Most science and technology writers who specialize in a subject (medicine or environment, for example) read the major publications. When possible, it is advisable to subscribe to these publications. In medicine, two of the leading publications are *The New England Journal of Medicine, The Lancet*, *Journal of the American Medical Association, The British Medical Journal,* and *JAMA Internal Medicine.* Yet, there are dozens of more highly specialized medical journals and other types of medical publications. Most are available online and often have a social media presence as well. General science and official organizational technical publications, such as *Science,* are also good for story ideas.

Professional Science and Technology Organizations

In science and technology subjects, numerous professional organizations exist for the exchange of new knowledge and for continuing education. Most leading researchers participate in these organizations in one way or another. They hold regular conferences to present research and discuss new discoveries and developments. Examples include the American Psychological Association, American Medical Association, American Chemical Society, and American Institute of Architects. These groups hold regional, national, and international gatherings and provide a perfect forum for story ideas. Many sessions are public or can be open to writers with credentials. They have Web sites and a social media presence such as organizational pages for members and some of those may be public. Most scientific organizations also produce publications such as journals, magazines, and newsletters for members and outside subscribers. These publications can be excellent sources.

Conferences and Meetings

In addition to regular organizational meetings, industry- and profession-wide conferences, workshops, or symposia are regularly scheduled – generally once a year – to permit leading experts to gather and discuss the latest developments. Some of these meetings, such as the annual American Public Health Association, attract thousands of members and interested persons to events usually held in major city convention centers. Often, the latest study findings are presented by researchers at these meetings and these leading authorities gather to discuss trends, plan research, and even look for employment and funding. These meetings transcend individual and institutional interests and provide even better opportunities for writers to develop sources and feature story prospects. Many groups that hold these national and international meetings have dozens of subdivisions according to specializations and interests (for example, cardiologists within the American Medical Association) and regional subgroups (for instance, by nation, state, or county).

Often these meetings may be previewed simply by checking the group's Website or social media page. Groups frequently post schedules, speaker information, and other details that are easy to access. Another suggestion is to request that your name and e-mail address be added to any news releases distribution lists of the groups.

Universities and Colleges

You probably have one nearby or are studying at one. Major universities and colleges that have research missions (usually the larger state and private four-year schools with doctoral-level graduate programs) provide a ready and usually willing series of sources for new information on just about any subject. This is particularly true about universities with medical and other professional schools and centers. A look at a current online catalog or just the institution's Web site will let you know what programs exist at the university and, from that, what types of research may be conducted. The institution's Website will list the names of faculty and their professional biographies and may provide basic contact information. In addition to these sources, some universities and colleges have begun to offer science and technology

journalism programs. New York University, Columbia, and Johns Hopkins, for example, offer graduate degree programs in science writing.

Institutes, Centers, and Research Groups

Perhaps the best-known national organization that supports science and technology development is the National Science Foundation. This is not only a national funding source for research, but it is also a source of information about the research that it is funding. Other sources exist at independent institutes, centers, and groups that can provide the latest information on topics of current concern and these research organizations often post basic information on the Web for writers to use for background and for generating story ideas.

Science and Digital Technology Writing Trouble Spots

Writing about science and technology, even with the best sources available, can have challenging moments. As a feature writer involved in writing about complicated information, you must be able to discern fact from opinion. One way this can be done is by using multiple expert sources. Diversity of authoritative sources is often necessary when writing about scientific research and similar work at the cutting edge of a subject, where the lines between scientific opinion and scientific fact are frequently blurred. We saw this all too often during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. And once politics entered the pandemic discussion, matters became far more difficult to discern. Scientists frequently disagree about matters, especially new developments and theories.

Science writers also have the occasional opportunity to write about what some authorities call *maverick* science. This involves writing about very unorthodox or unusual scientific theories such as those that would predict earthquakes or propose miracle cures or treatments for major diseases. The least-preferred – but perhaps most tempting – approach to this, journalism's conventional practices dictate, is to tell readers what to think about these maverick theories. Traditions of objectivity and fairness do not support this approach, however. Most science writers feel they should be more critical of maverick explanations and the individuals who advocate them than they would be of more conventional sources with more credible explanations. Research at Michigan State University suggests that because science writers already depend on authority figures for the content of stories about scientific controversies involving maverick theories, they should also depend on these expert sources for the interpretation of the context of the controversy (Dearing & Kazmierczak, 1992).

Science and technology feature writing runs the risk of being incomplete as well. At times, sources may be unwilling to discuss all aspects of their work. It can be proprietary, as we saw during the development of vaccines for COVID-19 by several global pharmaceutical corporations in 2020. Incomplete reporting causes confusion and uncertainty, and this can result in a lack of clarity. At times, sources are unprepared to talk with writers, or they cannot adequately explain their work to you. If this occurs, how can you expect to make sense of things for your readers? Nevertheless, scientists can be skeptical about you and your effort to communicate

their work to the world. You must make a concerted effort to gain their confidence and trust.

Science and technology writers can get involuntarily involved in the politics of the scientific community as well – especially when hard-to-get public and private funding is at stake. Writers must be able to cut through the competitive nature and hype of some scientists and technicians to get at the heart of a matter. Cures and solutions to difficult scientific problems must be viewed with skepticism on your part, too. At times, announcements of study results can be premature and create unjustified optimism in readers. Writers must be careful not to overdramatize the importance of the results of studies they report.

Science Writing Groups on the Web

Web sites of important science, environmental, medical, and investigative journalism organizations:

National Association of Science Writers, http://www.nasw.org
Science Writers and Communicators of Canada, http://www.sciencewriters.ca
Association of British Science Writers, https://www.absw.org.uk
International Science Writers Association, http://internationalsciencewriters.org
Society of Environmental Journalists, http://www.sej.org
Association of Health Care Journalists, http://www.ahcj.umn.edu
World Federation of Science Journalists, http://www.wfsj.org
Investigative Reporters & Editors, http://www.ire.org

Still another caution about science sources involves the illegitimate source. You will occasionally encounter sources that attempt to provide evidence about new discoveries that is faked or artificially enhanced. There were numerous instances of this during the beginning months of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was particularly common on social media sites, but also on certain Web sites. There are individuals who try to gain attention through tricks and hoaxes. To avoid being duped, it is important not to depend solely on the information provided by a single source. Science writers should go beyond press releases and research reports in collecting information. These sources are only starting points and should be supplemented by expert interviews and other written sources where possible.

Public relations staffers for companies involved in the research and development of new products can be helpful to you, but they can also be an obstacle. These individuals can stop you in your tracks from getting important information that they see as negative or otherwise disadvantageous for their clients. They often have different ideas about how to use new information. It is up to you to get around these barriers by talking to the scientists and managers directly whenever possible. And it may not be possible.

On occasion, it might be appropriate for you to double-check your story's first draft, or parts of it, with your primary sources. This is done solely in the interest of

accuracy. Although this is not a normal procedure in most feature writing, it is sometimes necessary when writing on highly scientific and technology subjects.

It is also important to discuss sensationalism. Despite your impressions about the value of the story and the enthusiasm of your sources, be careful about "hyping" the story. Because science writing is not often glamorous and does not often command page 1 or cover story levels, there is a temptation to overwrite an article and exaggerate its importance to gain an editor's attention.

Reading a Scientific Journal

Most scientific journals that report the findings of new research studies in a discipline to follow the same general model for the publication of articles. Today, it is easier than ever to find some of this work online. Using university and college libraries, vast collections of research literature can be searched, read, and downloaded as pdf files for later use. While some journals are only accessible online by members or subscribers, libraries provide some access when it cannot be found otherwise. In these journal articles, some sections are more important than others for non-expert readers. Here is a list of those most useful sections and their value to science and technology feature article writers:

- *Introduction and literature review* – This section can be skimmed but usually has minimal value to you. In it, you find out about the specific problem being studied, what has previously been learned by other researchers working on the subject, and justification for the present study.
- *Statement of hypotheses or research questions* – This part is a bit more important because it reveals the very specific focus of the study. What does the researcher want to find and, in the case of hypotheses, expect to find?
- *Study method* – Almost all research reports should have a section devoted to study procedures. Research can be conducted in different ways and use an equal number of methodologies. Some quantitative, some qualitative. Some is based on group surveys, some experiments, some case studies, some observational, and some even participatory. What materials and methods were used in the study? What type of study (survey, experiment, and so on) was it? This section is valuable to reporters only if the procedures used are controversial, revolutionary, or otherwise noteworthy.
- *Findings* – The findings are far more valuable than the previously noted sections. Usually, these are reported as text, but findings may also be placed in statistical tables for quantitative studies. What did the study determine? The article should tell you in this section. What do you think of the findings?
- *Conclusions and discussion* –Interpretation may be as important to you as the actual findings. Much of a study's value to you depends on the quality of this section, but this is the place where the researcher tries to make sense of the findings. The key point here is for the researcher to describe the meaning of the findings and simply not retell them. The researcher should also discuss the shortcomings of the research in this section.

Other common parts of research journal articles include an abstract, the author's identification, funding sources, acknowledgments, data tables and graphics, and appendices.

Coping with Quantitative Information

One reason some writers shy away from science and technology writing is their aversion to anything involving numbers. This is especially true if the numbers are so small or so large most people cannot comprehend them. Readers often have the same aversion to statistics. Science and technology stories with many numbers or articles burdened with statistics simply turn off certain readers. It is up to you to judge the right amount of quantitative information in your articles.

Jack Hart, a University of Oregon professor and former managing editor and writing coach for *The Oregonian,* said we must be prepared to deal with numbers because there is no way of avoiding them.

"The march of science and the computerization of government means that counting things becomes more and more fundamental to the process of daily life," he said. "We must not only get numbers right, we must keep stories that contain them interesting and meaningful" (Hart 1991c, p. 1).

Hart proposed that writers do the arithmetic for readers. Check how a number was computed and its accuracy before the story is published. He said it helps to visualize what the numbers represent. He also advised writers to use comparable forms of numbers (e.g., percentages or fractions) when using more than one statistic in a sentence or paragraph and to make the numbers meaningful by putting them in terms average readers understand.

It is also beneficial to use only the numbers you need and eliminate others. Minimize numerical density and avoid excessive detail, Hart recommended, by not packing too many numbers into a single paragraph. Often, making numbers in science and technology stories reader-friendly means finding ways to sugarcoat the statistical medicine for readers. The information may be critical to the article, and you must use it. Being creative helps retain readership.

Here are some additional tips:

- Use informational graphics.
- Round off or shorten the detail of very large or small numbers.
- Put numbers in a meaningful context with examples. If you have statistics for an entire state or country, reduce them to a level that makes more sense.
- Interpret unusual statistics. Tell readers what they mean. Is a statistic good or bad, high or low?

Basic Structure for Writing

When you sit down to write a science or technology article, the usual rules for writing and organization apply. Because of the unusual nature of the material involved, a little extra effort makes a big difference. You need to achieve these four goals:

- *Get the reader's attention* – Using whatever lead you choose, draw the readers into the article. Make them want to read it. Create drama. Use tension. No matter what you do, do not lose your potential readers with a slow, unimaginative start.

- *Get the reader personally involved* – After you have the reader's attention, show the reader how this subject affects him or her. What does it mean to the reader? Can you help him or her identify with the subject? Have you written it in a personal way so that it appeals on an individual level? How can your reader benefit from the article's content?
- *Illustrate your points* – If you achieve this goal, you are showing readers about what you are writing. Give examples and case studies. But try to provide situations that can be understood at the level of your reader – whether the public or the sophisticated specialist.
- *Explain the meaning* – Tell readers what this development means. Do not leave your reader with the feeling, "so what?" when he or she puts down your article. This is the major point of your article, so be certain you have made this assessment at some point. Many writers recommend the "so what?" be placed near the end as part of the conclusion.

Illustrations Help Tell a Complex Story

Visual content such as informational graphics help tells the science and technology story that contains complicated statistics, numbers, or other quantitative information. However, that is only one important use of graphics and illustrations. These illustrations combine factual information with visual techniques such as graphs, charts, maps, or exploded diagrams to tell a story. With publications and online sites using color, the value of these visual packages in explaining complicated science, medicine, or technology subjects is growing. At times, photographs can be the answer. Posed photographs that serve as illustrations can make the point also.

In many cases, it is appropriate and necessary for you as the writer to take the lead in suggesting visual approaches for the story. These techniques are particularly helpful for science and technology writers. For example, in explaining how the recently launched James Webb Space Telescope functions, its purpose, and its revolutionary technology, publications and Web sites used diagrams, maps, illustrations, and a range of multimedia to explain its journey after launch, its setup, testing, and its operation. Then there were the images of parts of space never seen before --- from within our own solar system to the most distant observable galaxies in the beginnings of the universe. We used the images, of course, but science and space writers also needed to explain what we were seeing.

The principle is no different from certain types of service articles such as the how-to article. To make information more understandable – something as routine as bypass surgery or as unusual as a coastal nuclear reactor meltdown caused by a tsunami – illustrations such as informational graphics are necessary to tell the story.

Enticing People to Read About Science

Patrice G. Adcroft, special projects editor at Discover Media and former editorial director for *Discover*, the monthly consumer science magazine, is a veteran national consumer magazines editor and novelist who was once editor-in-chief of the now-closed science-based *Omni* magazine. Adcroft, supervised *Discover's* print and digital

editorial content when she was its editor, said she believes it is a challenge to entice readers into science and technology material.

"Nobody but nobody wants to read technical writing. It does nothing that good writing ought to do: inform, entertain, and move the reader in some way. Expose an idea to the air, convert a nonbeliever. Instill a sense of wonderment. Let the reader in on a universal truth. What science writing should be is really up to you, the writer. Every piece should carry with it some kind of agenda: a determination to arrive at something greater than just a set of facts. I can tell you what good science writing—good journalism—should not do: it should never intimidate, pontificate, or confuse," she explained.

"Even the most complex scientific breakthrough can be described in ordinary terms. Writers who rely on jargon are either befuddled or snobs. I wouldn't want my readers to have to put up with either of these. Telling a good story is fundamental to good writing. Don't forget to leave a trail that guides the reader from lead to end. Just be sure that the trail consists of something more substantive than breadcrumbs. The trail should be clearly marked, with a few resting-places along the way where a reader can stop and catch his breath and reflect on what's been said. I really care about the way an article sounds. If one of my editors is having trouble with an article, I'll tell him to read the piece aloud. Then he gets an idea of how it will sound in the reader's head. If a sentence just clunks along, or you can't get its meaning from one reading, there's a problem.

"Science writers should know how to interview professionals. That means getting them to talk on the average person's level. If you don't understand a concept or formula, neither will the reader. I have something I call the amazing dumb animal question. When there's something terribly complex to grasp, the theory of chaos, for example, or automata, I preface my questions with: 'OK. This may sound like a dumb animal question, but …' I've asked bioengineers to compare artificial organs to washing machines, neurologists to compare the central nervous system to the New York subway lines (the article was going in a publication geared for New Yorkers). Always ask your source to compare whatever he's talking about to an everyday item. Seek out an image the reader can hang on to. This will make the item, concept, equation, live," Adcroft advised.

"A few words about the best science-technology stories I've published: All contained some human element (a maverick scientist's struggle with a staid institution, for example); all were clear, but not simple-minded; all took the reader on a journey which left him more aware of himself and the world around him. Many were cleverly packaged— an article on the future of films appeared as movie treatments, actually written by famous directors who were told to pretend that they had the most futuristic technology at their fingertips. Good science writing doesn't just report on a breakthrough and leave it at that; it investigates the consequences of the discovery or breakthrough," Adcroft stated (Personal communication to author, August 16, 1988).

Part III

Becoming a Professional Writer



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Chapter 20

Campus Feature Writing

Are you a student writing for one or more of your campus news organizations this semester? Newspaper? Magazine? Yearbook? A Web site? A social media page? If not, you should be. They provide remarkable opportunities to learn about writing features through experience, one story at a time.

Working for a student newspaper or campus magazine, a student-based news service, or an online campus news site is one of the easiest and best ways to get some real-world experience as a student writer that extends well beyond the classroom. Classes can only do so much, and the experience is necessary. The common-sense place to start is on your campus. Many campus news organizations actively seek out students for writing assignments opportunities each semester. You can write features and breaking news, but the most valuable experience is doing something that will wind up in print or online.

Campus news media and campuses are outstanding environments for student feature writers. If you take a few minutes and browse some of the college newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and online publications on your own campus and ones that are commonly available on the World Wide Web, you will discover that the diversity of subjects and approaches to feature articles is not much different than those of professional publications. Campus daily newspapers such as *The Daily Texan* at the University of Texas at Austin (https://thedailytexan.com), the *UW Daily* at the University of Washington (https://www.dailyuw.com), or the *Indiana Daily Student* at Indiana University at Bloomington (http://idsnews.com) offer real-world feature writing opportunities and experiences for students on campus. But the same can be said about smaller schools with smaller campus news media.

Campus magazines offer an equally good experience. Increasingly, colleges and universities have created magazines or students have started their own student-run magazines. Some are printed and others are online-only. Take a look at Columbia College (Chicago)'s *Echo* (https://issuu.com/thecolumbiachronicle), Ohio University's *Backdrop* (https://www.backdropmagazine.com), the University of Miami's *Distraction* (https://www.distractionmagazine.com), or London's Imperial College *I, Science* magazine (https://isciencemag.co.uk). There are thousands of other campuses that provide young writers, even those just getting started on their journey. The opportunities are the same as with campus newspapers or yearbooks --- assignments and writing opportunities for the taking. If you are a college student and not doing any writing for publication, you need to get started. Go. Do. It. No excuses. Find the

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time. Go volunteer, ask for an assignment, or, better, come up with something of your own and go to the newsrooms.

Student feature writers produce stories about student leaders, celebrations, campus tragedies, unusual research studies, vacations, nightlife, health and wellness, new faculty or deans, concerts, theater performances, film festivals, and even the weather. Some of these are challenging stories and require a level of subject expertise or writing and reporting experience to be done effectively. Others are straightforward and perfect opportunities for a beginning writer. Your first feature story assignment may not involve a complicated story; it may be produced for a writing class or for one of the student publications or Web sites. In fact, if you have written a story or two for classes, revise them and offer them to your newspaper or magazine on campus.

You receive the assignment and get started. It is probably a very good opportunity to get your first story into print or online. Student publications serve a noble purpose for their campuses– they are the primary mass communication means at many schools– and their feature content is an important part of those publications. Not only do these publications provide a forum for the development of student journalistic skills, but they also inform students, faculty, and staff. Campus publications are important voices where there may not be many other options.

Feature stories are a significant part of student publications content because so many student publications are produced on non-daily deadlines. The infrequency of publication often dictates a more feature-oriented approach to writing breaking news, which usually would be treated as a news story rather than a feature. Some major campus student newspapers are dailies with a larger proportion of breaking or spot news and a full-feature Web site, but most campus publications are not. Student newspapers that publish once or twice a week have even larger percentages of feature content. It is one of the ways these publications strive to keep stories fresh and appealing. Similarly, campus magazines, which may publish only once or twice a semester, have large proportions of major and minor feature articles in their content mix. This means there are numerous feature-writing opportunities for a beginning college-level writer. In fact, these opportunities are the best places for you to build confidence in your work, to collect links to your stories for your resume, and to show others that you can master feature writing.

Large colleges and universities may have a half dozen or more university-sponsored, student-funded, and independent student-oriented publications. In addition to the more conventional campus newspapers, you may find laboratory newspapers produced occasionally by news-editorial or journalism programs or by specific journalism, communication, or English Department classes. There may be other special newspapers produced from time to time by organizations such as student affairs, the athletic department, academic units, administrative offices such as admissions and enrollments, and alumni associations.

There are similar opportunities with campus magazines. Most major universities and colleges have one or more regularly published magazines. Some are only once- or twice-a-year specialized magazines, such as literary or greek organization publications, but others are issued on a more frequent basis. Student journalists should not overlook newsletters and yearbooks as additional outlets for their work. Most student organizations have a need to communicate with their members or potential members and newsletters are frequently used. And yearbooks, while annuals, need

good writers and interesting features for their pages. There are opportunities for beginners looking for their first byline in all these publications right on your campus.

Feature stories are probably among the easiest types of stories to develop on a campus for beginning writers. You are writing about a place that is familiar to you and using sources that are reasonably easy to contact and develop. The stories are typically not as time-sensitive as breaking news. There is also the convenience of geographic proximity and easy-to-get background information that helps beginners as well. These experiences not only build confidence, they also give novices their first experiences in working with editors. You have a chance to try out the techniques and approaches you have read about and discussed in writing classes. These may be the least difficult markets for beginners to crack. Sometimes, beginning college-level writers can sell their work to local newspapers or magazines as freelancers, or get in the door as interns, but this is rare. It may not take long for a strong and talented writer to develop the skills necessary to make the jump from college publications to more professional ones, but the place for most students to start, is on campus.

Working and Learning with Other Students

The opportunities to write feature articles while you are a student at a college or university are important ones in your development as a professional feature writer. It is your opportunity to learn. It is also a chance to experiment with new reporting and writing approaches. It is a place to develop your own writing style. In an educational environment, there is more room for making mistakes from which you can grow. There is the chance to work closely with professors, publication advisors, and other more experienced writing coaches who may not be as readily available to you once you leave school.

Working with student editors is also an opportunity for student writers to learn the interpersonal skills needed to function as a professional. The give-and-take between an editor and a writer is not all that different on a college campus. The concerns and basics of the relationships are the same. Perhaps the major reason campus feature writing is different is that it is a learning experience. While you do not want to make mistakes, you can. Although you do not want to leave problems with editors or sources unsolved, you might. Although you do not want to use bad judgment, you could. In essence, opportunities with student publications are the time to learn by doing. Try the theory from class discussions and textbooks and put it into practice. We learn from experiences, and the journalistic opportunities you have on campus will enhance your writing. This is the time to experiment with your writing – try things you might not have the chance to try once your career begins. It is the time to stretch yourself and see what your real potential can be.

Most colleges and universities produce a number of publications for students, faculty, staff, and alumni. Although these are written and edited by professional staff, students often are given opportunities to take assignments as work required for classes, for part-time employment, and for other laboratory experiences. How do you get started? At most student publications, it is as simple as walking into the office and asking to meet with an editor. Introduce yourself and tell him or her that you want to write. An application might be completed along the way, but the big step is asking for, and accepting, that first assignment. Some publications give you a specific

assignment to begin. Others are willing to take your own suggestions for stories. Because you may be asked to propose something, be prepared to suggest a strong feature story idea.

Working with Student Editors

Most of the editors you work with on campus are also students. Although some may be graduate students, the vast majority are juniors and seniors. This means that most student editors have limited experience and are learning as they work. Although the editors might have more experience as a writer or reporter than you, they do not have that much more experience. This means there must be a lot of flexibility in the relationship between student writers and editors. Mistakes will be made on both ends. Questionable decisions are made. Tempers may get out of control. There may be tears. But you, as a feature writer, need to take as much as you can from the relationship by gaining additional experience and learning from your editor. Consider the situation Newsroom People Skills 101.

Student editors, as individuals also learning their jobs, might not be as well organized as they should be. You may find the direction of your assignment changes in midstream. Some editors might not be as specific on the focus needed for a story. They might forget the details you need, or they might not be able to suggest contact people or sources as effectively as a more-seasoned professional. These individuals have earned their positions by paying some dues and usually have learned something from that experience. You can benefit from it, too. In fact, some students argue that they learn more from their student editors and their experiences writing for these peer "bosses" than they do in writing and other journalism classes because there is no pressure of grades. The practical value of the experience is not to be doubted.

Perhaps the most important part of the student editor-feature writer relationship is for you as the writer to earn *trust* in your work. This is done through meticulous attention to detail. The story must be complete, but it must also be accurate. It must be completed by the stated deadline. Student editors are exactly like their professional counterparts in this regard, of course. If you go into a publication office with a hastily prepared, poorly written article with no direct quotations, you are in trouble right away. An error-prone feature article does not impress any editor, so do not expect to get a second chance. The same goes for a casual attitude about deadlines.

On the other hand, if the story is thoughtfully done on time with clever writing, sound organization, attention-getting description, and personality-filled direct quotations, your story will not only be published but probably you will be asked to take on more assignments for upcoming issues. In other words, be prepared. Make a strong first impression even if it is for a student publication. Put time into the effort. It will pay you back in countless ways, but the most significant one will be in the number of opportunities you develop for yourself.

Campus Newspapers

As in the commercial world, college newspapers come in all shapes and sizes. Some are broadsheet (or traditional full size) whereas others are tabloids (rotated half-size pages). Most have gone online, and some have ceased or reduced the number of print editions

each semester. Some campus newspapers publish as seldom as two or three times a month, others as often as five to seven days a week when school is in session. Some have summer editions whereas others do not. In terms of management, some campus newspapers are independent of the school's central administration, but many are not.

Regardless of the type of newspaper on your campus, it is likely that your school has some sort of newspaper and perhaps even more than one. Depending on the school and its size, opportunities to write features for student newspapers vary. Some campus newspapers, even the highest quality ones, can never seem to recruit enough news and feature writers. As a school publication, there will be regular staff turnover. Others, most likely ones published at major state universities and other big schools, have much more competitive situations and any staff writing positions are harder to secure.

Two of the most popular feature-oriented sections are typically entertainment and sports. A third widely read section embraces student lifestyles and off-campus activities. These are subjects in which college students often seem to feel most comfortable and are great places to start. However, remember that there are other sections needing help, too. Opinion section editors are always looking for insightful and interesting columnists with a fresh look at current events or with something to say about the issues. Student activities – how students spend their time both on and off campus – never cease to be potential feature material.

Entertainment and campus events that are a part of student lifestyles are also reasons to write features. And it is newsworthy when proposals are put forth to change policies or laws that affect the activities and interests of students. For example, when a community noise ordinance is proposed that might restrict outdoor campus concerts with an earlier end time, a feature could look at how students may feel about the proposal and how other nearby schools handle the issue.

News organizations use features to balance the routine spot coverage of the day. These features often offer unique perspectives and sometimes can set a seasonal mood for readers. This was the case for one writer for the University of Florida's daily student newspaper. Keith Herrel, who was a student feature writer for *The Independent Alligator* in Gainesville (http://www.alligator.org), wrote an entertaining and now classic Thanksgiving seasonal feature. In his story headlined, "The Lord Provides It, and We Cook It," he tells a warm personal story about a rural family that lives near the university and how it prepares its highly unusual holiday feast in a true communal style. Notice that the story has not lost its holiday appeal with the passage of time (written for Thanksgiving in 1989) and how it is enriched by Herrel's use of strong and revealing direct quotations. He allows his sources to tell their story. This is Herrel's engaging story:

> *It's easy to find Thelma Markham at Thanksgiving. Just pull up next to the Grove Park store on Highway 20 east of Gainesville, roll down the window and ask for "T.J." One of the many locals who gather around the picnic table will point east and say, "Just follow your nose."*
>
> *The brief directions are explicit indeed. If Thelma is home and the wind is blowing the right way, the delectable scent of roasting wild meat will mingle with the aroma of fresh vegetables and attract hungry visitors from all over town.*

Down the pitted dirt road that leads to Thelma's place, the modern world temporarily ceases to exist. On both sides of the road, amid the trees draped with Spanish moss, stand multi-colored houses arranged helter-skelter like handfuls of tin-roofed dice thrown down by some impetuous gambler.

It's easy to distinguish Thelma's house from the rest. The laughter there is louder, the crowd larger and the welcome heartier.

"Pick up a plate and sit down," is a favorite greeting of Cheristine, Thelma's sister. She will tell you in a friendly bluffness to go into the dining room and fill up your dish.

The food will be in a horseshoe-shaped arrangement in the rustic dining room. But filling your plate may not be an easy task; at any time there might be 40 or more of Thelma's friends and relatives vying for the steaming foods in the compact room. If this is the case, then it is a perfect time to visit the cook.

Thelma, 26, will be in her small kitchen, adjacent to the dining room. She will greet you with a smile and talk to you as she skillfully prepares some of her specialties, ranging from cooter to 'coon and gator to gravy. Some opossums will be in the pot and turkeys in the oven as she wipes her hands with a towel and carries a casserole dish heaped with swamp cabbage into the awaiting holiday throng.

Thelma, who is single and has no children of her own, is the uncontested culinary master of her family. She has been for years.

But exactly how long ago she took command of the kitchen is uncertain.

"She was about 8 years old when she started," Thelma's uncle Johnny Mack, 40, said. Sitting on one of the two living room couches, wearing a gray Fedora and sipping a cold Old Milwaukee, Johnny reminisced about Thelma's earliest meals.

"I started cooking at least 18 years ago," Thelma said.

"She was 11. And the first thing she cooked was a red velvet cake," said Zennie Sheffield, Thelma's 80-year-old great-grandmother.

Although her family disagrees about when Thelma began her cooking, everyone agrees that her food is excellent.

"They better tell me my food is good. 'Cause if they don't, they won't be eating here anymore," Thelma said with determination.

For Thelma's family, having her in the kitchen means having a cornucopia on the table. But exactly how big is Thelma's family?

"I got so many grand, great-grand and greater-grandchildren that if they were all hogs, I'd be rich," Mrs. Sheffield said. "I came down here from Georgia about 45 years ago with my father and my five children. Now I have close to 100 relatives living around here."

Mrs. Sheffield lives in the house next to Thelma's. The two houses, along with the yard that separates and surrounds them, have a personality all their own. The yard is frequented and fertilized by an array of animals, domestic and wild.

Red and yellow hens and roosters, pecking and cock-a-doodling at whim, strut around the amber grass and green shrubs. Armadillo and wild turkeys sometimes venture on the grounds and usually find themselves on Thelma's table. Bunky the cat scampers around, evading the eight or nine dogs that wait not so patiently for a generous handout from Thelma. A black pig named Arnold rounds out the cast.

The cacophony created by those animals sometimes competes with other noises made by various children screaming and groups of men shooting their shotguns in preparation for the day's hunt.

"You should have been here this past Super Bowl," Johnny Mack said. "I brought home a 10-point deer." He spread his arms wide to show the breadth of the animal's antlers with the 10 horns. "It fed about 15 people."

Thelma opened up one of her family's five full-length freezers. It was as full as a supermarket's meat case. She started pulling out the frozen bundles to try and tell what each one contained. After scraping ice off of the basketball-sized chunks of meat, she began to tell what was in each plastic-wrapped package.

"This is some of that wild boar. This is rabbit. This is probably 'coon. I think this is some of that wild turkey. Hmmmmmm. I don't know what this is."

"All of our freezers are like that," Cheristine said as she sat at the table eating some of Thelma's fried opossum and sweet potatoes, garnished with red peppers. "We're prepared for anything – hurricanes, tornadoes, water flows, fire, you name it.

The hundreds of pounds of meat and vegetables tucked away in Thelma's freezers probably could feed the whole family every day for one month before the supply ran out. But the freezers are unlikely to become barren, because everybody constantly adds either animals or vegetables to the stockpile.

"My cousin, he's the one who gets me the swamp cabbage," Thelma said. "He goes down by the trestle where the fishing water is, and there are these pell-mell plants.

He gets a machete and cuts away at the bark to the middle. Then he brings it to me. You have to cook it longer than regular cabbage though, just like you're cooking a pot of greens.

"Now my granddaddy, he has a garden with red peppers, greens, iced potatoes – just about all the vegetables we eat come from his garden. He's about 68 or 69 years old, and brother, he could sure get around. He's also cheaper on your pockets. All you have to do is go down there and bring him a six-pack, and he'll give you whatever you want."

With bartering like this, Thelma's table is seldom lacking in food, and this fact is never more obvious than at Thanksgiving.

The heat from the wood-burning stove banished the autumn cold and gave the house an old-world scent as Thelma sat at the dining-room table and told how she prepares her holiday banquets.

"In the evening, I start cooking. I'll cook until about five o'clock in the morning, and then I'll go take a nap.

"When I get up, I'll start putting out the food. It will be spread over that dresser, that dresser and this table." She made a sweeping motion with her hand around the room, showing the extent of the banquet area.

"Everybody starts at one end and works their way around. If they don't get enough the first time, they just have to go through the line again. Most people will come with their Tupperware dishes and take the food to go because there wouldn't be enough room for everybody if they stayed here."

The more than 40 guests who Thelma fed last Thanksgiving, however, found ample dining area in the yard and an overabundance of food on the table.

"I had ham, two turkeys, deer, opossum, 'coon. Let's see. Oh, yeah, I had a duck too. My nephew got it. My granddaddy gave us mustard and collard greens, string beans, potatoes, peas in the shell and okra. And we had swamp cabbage, too."

As if trying to establish the logic of it all, she said, "You see, you just can't have one or two meats at Thanksgiving or Christmas."

Her words came almost as an echo of her great-grandmother.

"If the children eat all that's there, there wasn't enough," Mrs. Sheffield said. "I brought them up that way."

To feed squadrons of hungry guests in the hearty manner that Thelma does, one would expect to pay dearly at the neighborhood supermarket.

"I gave my mother $50 to get some eggs, salt, pepper, milk and macaroni from the store," Thelma said. "Altogether I paid less than $40 for the Thanksgiving meal that lasted two days. The rest of the food was all natural. It came from out there." She pointed toward the dense woodland that sprawled behind her backyard.

Thelma's natural, robust personality is mirrored in the way she cooks her food. She abides by a no-frills code when preparing her meals. She has no need for exotic spices or arcane herbs. And she finds no need for a pencil and paper.

"A lot of people come along with a recipe book, and still their food don't taste good," Thelma said.

She went into the kitchen and came out with a one-quarter teaspoon silver measuring spoon. Then she dipped it into an imaginary canister, showing her spicing technique.

"I take a little spoon like this and I estimate. I judge a little bit. At times, I'll use parsley, bay leave, paprika, seasoned salt, celery or oregano. I put whatever I want to put in."

She put down the spoon and picked up a three-inch bone from a plate.

"Could you tell this was once a opossum?" she asked smiling. "Let me tell you about opossum. First, you can't go reachin' in the trap and grab one out or you'll get bit. Then you'll have to make sure they aren't foamin' at the mouth or you'll get sick. Then you swivel them over an open flame to get the hair off of them. After that you wash them down with washing powder and let them sit in salted water for a while to get the burnt taste out."

Thelma has a similar technique for wild turkey. She also has tricks on how to take the wild out of wild rabbit and ways to tenderize even the most sinewy meats. Yet there remains some secrets she won't reveal.

"I don't go giving away all my recipes," she said.

Even if some of her recipes are sacrosanct, most of the pleasure is in the palate, not in the preparation. Except maybe for Thelma.

"Cooking is a wonderful experience," Thelma said with an air of satisfaction. "I enjoy cooking and knowing that everybody knows where they are going to eat. It's just like the Waltons. They say grace, hold hands, and especially the bless the cook." She halted, and with arms akimbo, said, "If they don't they'll get sick!"

Enthusiastically, Thelma went on to tell about her aspirations for a special kind of restaurant.

"I'm gonna have some of everything. I'll be open for breakfast, lunch and dinner and have two bodyguards because of the crime and stuff. And I'm gonna call it, 'The Soul Food and Wildlife Restaurant.'"

If only a fraction of Thelma's friends and family dine at her prospective restaurant, it will become a bonanza. But until then, her intimate clientele will continue its feasting and festivities at her home, realizing how good life can be.

"We do it good in the woods," Cheristine said as she enjoyed a piece of Thelma's wild rabbit. "The Lord provides it, and we cook it."

(Herrel, 1989, p. 8)
(Reprinted with the permission of the *Independent Alligator*, University of Florida, Gainesville.)

Campus Magazines

Campus magazines come in several forms. Some magazines are affiliated with campus newspapers and distributed as part of the newspaper, but most are independent publications that are not tied to other publications in any manner. Campus magazines can be routinely organized, or formatted, to offer longer features, listings, columns, and other content. Or they can be publications devoted to special topics such as spring break, job hunting and careers, a season preview of a varsity sport, or a special annual event on campus such as homecoming. Some magazines are special reports in tabloid format published as part of the student newspaper or independently by classes.

In recent years, online campus magazines have become widespread. These may or may not be tied to existing printed publications. Some are organizational in nature, whereas others serve the entire campus. Although most publish on a regular basis

when school is in session, some campus magazines and special reports are published as infrequently as once a year.

In addition to those named at the beginning of the chapter, some of the best campus magazines are *Scan* at the Savannah College of Art and Design (https://scadscan.com), *Ball Bearings*, Ball State University (https://ballbearingsmag.com), *Tusk* (http://tuskmagazine.fullerton.edu) at California State University, Fullerton, *Flux* (https://www.fluxoregon.com) at the University of Oregon, and *Blot* (https://www.blotmagazine.com) at the University of Idaho. But there are dozens of other excellent campus magazines out there for students to check out online. Some are not directly affiliated with the universities they serve and are independent. They can be specialized also, such as focused on entertainment, literature, multiple schools in a single area, music, or sports.

Prof. Randy Stano has taught about magazines and publication design at the University of Miami for almost three decades after working for the *Miami Herald, Kansas City Star,* and other daily newspapers. A professor of professional practice, he is a popular speaker and workshop leader at national college and high school media conferences. Stano serves as faculty advisor to the UM student magazine, *Distraction*, and the yearbook, *Ibis*. He is recipient of the Distinguished Adviser Award for Magazine Advising in 2022 and the Reid Montgomery Award for excellence in college media advising in 2016, both from the College Media Association. His magazine and yearbook are frequent top award winners in national student media competitions. He is a close observer to the student media scene. Stano says he feels that written content is fundamental to the success of a campus news organization, no matter its format.

"First you need to know the objective, or goal, of the publication --- who is its audience and the dynamics of the college/university campus. Deadline, beat, or general news writing will not work for a collegiate feature magazine. Most college feature magazines have a two-to-three-week delay from deadline to delivery of the printed publication. The print magazines will not upload a story online until the printed issue is delivered. Look for feature stories that do not have a heavily time-dependent angle," he explained.

"College feature magazines are using softer articles or longer investigated pieces that are segmented to appeal to their audiences. Soft stories for a collegiate publication can be everything from fashion, food, the arts/entertainment, travel, how-to, personalities, and even interview question/answer features," Stano noted. "You will even find feature stories being presented with strong photography and extended captions that tell the story in three to four sentences. Maybe the fashion or food story is better written through a visual storytelling process.

"When creating a story for a college feature magazine, think light, and what some writers might call fluff stories that can be segmented into easy reading for the reader/viewer. Consider segmenting the story into multiple pieces with a strong lead to catch reader attention and then use catchy subheads to pull the reader into different sections. Remember that the Poynter Institute for Media Studies has done research that readers/viewers may jump around or scan a story instead of reading the entire article from beginning to end," Stano stated.

"An alternative type of feature writing should be your aim to grab a collegiate audience. You could use a series of charts, diagrams, and word vignettes to tell a

story. Take a good look at what is happening in social media to see how you could readapt that approach into putting together a feature story for a college publication. Yes, you need to think outside the box and use visuals to help tell the story," Stano said.

Stano sees a current movement toward new campus magazines that serve specialized audiences. Student organizations, for example, are creating their own periodicals to represent their specific interests, for example, in politics, in non-fiction writing, in the sciences, and about minority groups. "There has been an increase in the start-up of feature magazines across college campuses in the United States," he observed (Personal communication to the author, July 18, 2022).

Campus magazines that are not associated with campus newspapers can be specialized publications. Some are published for distribution on campus by magazine programs and others are published for sale in the neighboring community or region. Still other student-written and student-edited magazines represent the interests of student organizations, academic departments, or other units of the institution. Commonly found in English departments, for instance, are student literary magazines containing a mixture of fiction and nonfiction articles. These magazines often use nonfiction feature articles and essays in addition to short stories, poetry, and other creative writing.

Campus Yearbooks

Most universities and colleges have yearbooks. After a generation of absence or downsizing on some campuses and experimentation with video formats, traditional yearbooks have made a comeback in print and online formats. Although these publications are annually issued, they afford opportunities for student feature writers interested in specialized forms of writing that are not time bound and are more people-oriented. Yearbooks are usually dominated by their photographic content, but most editors seek some sort of balance with a collection of student-written articles that focus on all aspects of student life.

Usually, a yearbook has a single editor in charge of the whole book; he or she delegates responsibilities for specific assignments to section editors. Students write stories about organizations, major unusual events on campus, new facilities, student leaders, annual major activities each year, outstanding administrators, and the leading faculty members on campus. Some yearbooks run extended feature articles much like a magazine, using text and photographs. The main distinction is the perspective the articles take – keeping in mind that yearbook features are frequently explanatory (why, when, or how) or retrospective features. The focus is on people (who) and activities (what) from the past year. Many yearbooks also run short, but informative, features discussing the purposes and accomplishments of active individuals and organizations during the past year.

Since these books are visual-dominant, stories usually do not run as long as those found in campus magazines or newspapers. Because yearbooks are often published each spring or summer, the stories must take an overview or general approach to the subject. Feature stories include profiles of student leaders and administrators and features about athletic teams and academic departments. Also common are feature articles about benchmark events on campus such as graduation, the day an athletic team won a

big championship, homecoming, or a visit by a dignitary such as a politician, internationally popular entertainer, or renowned scholar. Other features may be aftermath or follow-up articles that combine a series of related campus events into a single story.

Student writers interested in contributing to their yearbook should study the most recent two or three editions, but each one is a bit different. These are usually kept in the main library and the yearbook office. It is also a good idea to look at "exchange" yearbooks, ones that your school's yearbook staff receives in trade from other schools.

Campus Feature Sources

With thousands of persons on a college or university campus, there are many choices for reliable sources for feature assignments. Here is a list of some of the most used sources on campuses:

Administration
President's office and staff
University relations, news, and public relations office staff
Academic provosts, chancellors, and staff
Vice president of student affairs and staff
Deans, department chairs, and staff
University counsel and other attorneys on staff
University "official" Web site
Social media pages and groups maintained by school officials

Faculty
Research grant holders
Faculty authors
Distinguished faculty chair holders
Long-term faculty veterans
Outstanding teacher or outstanding researcher award winners
Academic advisors
Individual faculty course and research Web sites
Individual faculty social media pages
Community service programs supervised by faculty

Students
Independent, greek, and other social organizations leaders
Student organization Web sites and social media pages
Student government officers and government Web sites and social media pages
Academic organizations leaders
Professional societies leaders
Graduate students involved in research or teaching
Undergraduate and graduate student research award winners
Varsity athletics/sports information office
Individual student Web sites and blogs

Support Staff
Residence halls advisors and residence hall social media pages
University center director and staff
Health center director and staff
Employment and placement director and staff
Dining service director and staff
Recreation and intramurals director and staff
Campus public security and parking officers
Physical plant director and maintenance staff
Administrative support offices' Web sites and social media pages
College and university publications for employees

Campus Newsletters

There are thousands of student organizations on campuses across the country. There may be hundreds on your own campus. With e-mail, Web sites, social media, and low-cost computer-based publishing technology, it is no longer difficult for these usually impoverished groups to produce online or readable printed newsletters. Many distribute their newsletters as e-mail content, some as pdf attachments, but many today use the Web and e-mail for distribution. It isn't surprising to find some newsletter content posted to social media organizations or group pages, too. Many campus group newsletters are published locally on college and university campuses but are known to only a few people outside the organization they serve. Some, however, are produced on a national or regional level for college-level readers and command much wider attention.

These newsletters may be as small as two pages of text or may be as professional appearing as a slick, full-color magazine-like digital format. These newsletters are excellent places to gain feature writing experience. Why? First, chances are good that you know something about the organization and the special interests it represents. Even if you do not know much about the group or its mission, the organization may be small and probably needs assistance in producing content for its newsletter. This makes access relatively easy. You can probably select the assignments yourself– if not in the beginning, not long after you "prove" yourself. You probably will not get paid for working on a campus newsletter, but you will get your writing published. For a beginner, this is important.

University Professional Publications

Who is interested in reading about a college or university? Many, many people. They are large institutions with numerous and large constituencies. Faculty, staff, students, parents of students, alumni, athletics supporters, campus neighbors, and the community it serves. Editors of these publications often seek part-time student writing assistance. This is for several practical reasons. First, these publications of educational institutions want to provide opportunities for students to learn. Second, established professionals cost more than students and these publications may have small budgets. An editor in this situation is willing to trade off one-on-one teaching to

get the needed staff assistance when the publication's budget is stretched. Advanced reporting and writing courses, practicum classes, internships, college work-study programs, and other opportunities should be available for beginning feature writers to help create regular part-time or temporary internships, clerical, research, or writing positions. Most of the time, assignments are given by professional editors or teachers, but a feature writer with initiative – displaying enterprise with strong story ideas – can make his or her own break.

One example of this type of publication is the *Torchbearer* at the University of Tennessee system main campus in Knoxville, published twice a year by the Office of Alumni Affairs and Office of Communications and Marketing. The magazine is distributed to alumni, faculty, staff, and friends of the five campuses across the state. The magazine typically offers feature articles that highlight the activities of faculty, research, alumni, the administration, and current students. Articles often focus on the school traditions, school programs, facilities, campus life, and activities, but are always strongly focused on university people. Issues in education are also addressed. A recent issue included articles about an aerospace engineering graduate, the 40th anniversary of the university's campus FM radio station, a new old-fashioned ice cream parlor on campus, the 50th anniversary of Title IX on campus, how UT tech and innovation is improving life lives, and a recent graduate who has designed a line of women's clothing that helps disabled individuals to dress independently. The University of Tennessee also publishes *Our Tennessee*, published four times a year for all campuses of the University of Tennessee System. This magazine is aimed at alumni, friends, and supporters for all its campuses, institutes, and schools. The magazine reflects the wide range of interests and areas of research across the system and publishes stories reflecting it. Similar to *Torchbearer*, it includes food and agriculture, medicine, and health science, for example. A recent entire issue was devoted features about to farming, food and drink, food safety, and how the university assists farmers across the state. *Our Tennessee* was founded as *Tennessee Alumnus* and has served the state school's constituencies for more than 100 years.

Many colleges and universities produce professional-quality newsletters, most often distributed by e-mail, a Web site, or on social media, for general and/or specialized group consumption. Some of these are distributed free, but others are subscription-based or tied to membership in organizations that are hosted by the university or college. There are literally thousands of such publications that have specialized orientations. These are often disciplinary in nature, focusing on a particular academic interest.

Often student writing assistance is sought for newsletters such as these because these publications are produced on shoestring budgets.

Working as a Campus Feature Writer

The rigor of working for a campus newspaper, magazine, newsletter, Web site, or social media site will help you determine how committed you are to feature writing. There is a never-ending demand for the effort by staff members on most student publications. For campus newspapers, the hours are often long and late. Most campus newspapers are morning or 24/7 Web publications, and the hours leading to

the publication of an issue are frequently worked in the middle of the night and on weekends. This often means sacrificing social activities and other extracurricular interests to get an assignment completed.

Student magazines, Web and social media sites, newsletters, and yearbooks have more laid-back staff work styles because there are less-frequent publication schedules and deadlines to meet. For students writing features for these publications, the hours can also be long and frequently late. Staffs are often much smaller than those of campus newspapers and the degree of interaction among staff members and editors is high. The commitment to work on these publications is equally serious and costly, too, in terms of other extracurricular activities.

More Campus Feature Writing Opportunities

There is a wide range of other options for student campus feature writing. Perhaps the fastest-growing are publications and information sites on the Web. This has created a wide range of possibilities for individuals who can write feature and other types of news stories. Furthermore, a number of special social media pages such as Facebook and posting feeds such as Twitter are hosted by institutions.

Within academic units and extracurricular programs, numerous traditional and Web publications are also produced. Departmental, college, and university publications are among them. Numerous colleges and universities also offer feature writing opportunities like that one. Students in the School of Communication at the University of Miami write features for local newspapers such as the *Miami Herald* through the school's news service and writing classes. Undergraduates contribute features such as profiles of outstanding students, faculty, and alumni to the school's Web site and social media sites in addition to student-run campus media.

Athletic department publications offer still more options. At National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I (D-I) colleges and universities – which operate the major athletic programs in the nation – numerous publications are issued for the news media, alumni, students, and for season-ticket holders and supporter clubs and associations. These large departments also have their own Web sites and social media sites that need daily content developed.

Writing Campus Features Off Campus

As mentioned earlier, you may have a chance on some occasions to write a feature story that has interest beyond your campus publications. The story may originate as an idea of your own or as an assignment from a campus publication editor. Originally, you might complete the assignment for your school's newspaper, magazine, or a Web site. As you began to research the story, conduct interviews, and write it, you may discover that the real potential for the story goes beyond campus. For example, your story about migraine headache research at your university's medical school could interest many people in and beyond your community.

Therefore, you need to look at the feature assignments you complete for campus publications to determine their prospects to be sold elsewhere. Most student publications encourage it. There's nothing wrong with selling two or more articles from the same story research. Campus publications, especially, have limited circulation and

do not directly compete with commercial publications. In some cases, it might be a conflict, but it should not be a problem. If you consider this option, as a courtesy, you should discuss with the editor of the original publication the possibility of taking your story elsewhere to make certain there are no legal reasons, such as copyright, or ethical issues that will prevent you from doing so.

There is a strong chance you will have to modify or rewrite substantial portions of the original story. It may have to be rewritten in a major way, changing the focus of the topic and the range of sources used. A fresher lead may be necessary, also. But with a minimal amount of work, you might be able to take a story originally written for a campus publication and turn it into a strong story for a local weekly or regional daily newspaper or a regional magazine.

Off-Campus Publications

Students should never overlook writing opportunities *off campus* even while they are *on campus*. Local publications – especially Web sites – are routinely seeking part-time assistance and freelance contributions. Universities with journalism programs routinely get calls and e-mails from editors seeking help. As a student, you should investigate these opportunities as your writing skills mature. If you are not sure if you are ready, ask one of your professors for advice. And check your school or campus-wide placement service for internships and part-time opportunities.

The number and quality of these off-campus opportunities are often a function of the size of the community in which you live. Larger cities offer more chances, but there could also be more people, some with better qualifications than yours, competing for those assignments. Weekly newspapers and specialized Web sites are particularly good places to check because their staffs are ordinarily quite small, and they often welcome help. Specialized magazines, such as trade publications, may also need help but could require some knowledge of the subject.

To investigate these opportunities, check with your journalism or writing professors, your campus placement offices, or contact the publications directly. Writing for newspapers in other cities and states is also a possibility for college students. Students interested in sports can cover their school's varsity teams for out-of-town news organizations such as national, regional, and conference sports-oriented Web sites. There may be opportunities to write features about successful students for their hometown newspapers in other states. Another category of feature story prospects is significant faculty research being conducted on campus. Inquiries by telephone or e-mail may be all that is needed to set up an ongoing relationship with a publication. One thing is certain: These opportunities rarely seek you. You must find them.

Student Writers Must Earn Credibility

Prof. Nancy Beth Jackson teaches global communications at the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University and directs the Bloomberg College Editors' Leadership Workshop at the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University. Jackson, who also has taught at the University of Missouri,

knows the value of getting information right and she has made that point with an emphasis in her classes:

> Students find it easy enough to master the basics of the reporter's trade: inverted pyramids, feature leads, interviewing techniques, sourcing, stylebook rules, libel, and infographics. What's tough to add to the toolbox is *credibility*. Sure, all reporters must strive for facts, but accuracy and sensitivity are even more essential for feature writers, who literally walk into the lives and living rooms of strangers and walk out with stories that will be read by hundreds or thousands of people. A city-side reporter covering a council meeting or press conference can always rely on a more experienced journalist to ask just the right questions. A feature writer does one-on-one with the subject. Failing to establish rapport, the reporter will have to sweat to pull off the tale.
>
> If you are working for a major daily like *The New York Times*, you can tap into the credibility of the institution. For starters, people return your calls. But in Columbia, Missouri, students at both the *Maneater* campus weekly and the *Missourian* city daily produced by the J-school, suffer the sins of their predecessors. The joke goes that in this overly reported town with two dailies, three college newspapers, and high school publications, every man, woman, and child over the age of three has been interviewed at least once. Many refuse a second or third go around because they feel the first reporter was unprofessional. The problem is not unique to the University of Missouri.
>
> Since reporters don't have time to build up byline or personal reputations with readers, students must strive for instant credibility. How? The answer is both institutional and personal. Establish a publication policy for checking quotations with sources before a story is printed. Both *Maneater* and *Missourian* reporters are required to call back to verify all direct quotations even if it means missing a deadline. The two newspapers also require multiple sources on all stories, including features, and put a share of the credibility burden on the copy desk, pointing out that errors in grammar, spelling, and details like street addresses can also turn off readers.
>
> On the personal side, student journalists must be – like actors – costumed for their roles. Sweats and sneakers may get the story for you when interviewing contemporaries, but university administrators, city officials and other non-student sources may see sloppy dress as a reflection of a sloppy mind. Tee shirts, ripped jeans, hair out there, and nose rings might be the current campus fashion, but they generally are inappropriate for the job. Appearance is only part of a professional demeanor. Prepare for the interview – even more than an established professional does. Whether your subject is a novice at being interviewed or someone swamped by the media, you increase your credibility by letting them know you have done your homework. But your own youth and inexperience can work for you with many subjects. Make them like you. Then they'll talk.
>
> (Personal communication to author, May 1, 1993)

Chapter 21

Freelance Feature Writing

Are you ready to be a professional freelance feature writer? To earn a paycheck? Maybe you are not quite sure how to do it. Many freelance feature writers, especially those just starting out, write part-time. A few become successful enough that they build a lucrative full-time career as freelance writers. To be realistic, it is not a safe bet that you will find your full-time career in freelance feature writing—at least, not in the beginning. It takes time. If you follow the path of most feature writers, you become a part-time writer who has a full-time career in another, perhaps related, field. This is frequently the case for magazines, which usually maintain small writing staffs to focus more on production. With staff sizes shrinking, daily and weekly newspapers are using news services and freelance writers for feature material. Numerous new online markets, including preparing content for social media, have opened for writers.

Working as a freelance feature writer is demanding. You are your own boss. This puts you in charge of generating ideas, writing the stories, and then pitching and selling them. No one does any of this for you. Some writers thrive in this sort of environment—they are attracted to freedom and flexibility. Others cannot handle it well and prefer less-independent publication staff positions. You must decide what is best for you.

Some professional writers feel there is no better time than today to be a freelance feature writer. There are new markets, considering all the Web and social media opportunities, than ever before. Yes, some daily newspapers and magazines have closed or become smaller. Some have stopped their print editions and gone to the Web. And there is greater specialization in the magazine industry today. Online feature writing opportunities are available that did not exist a decade or two ago.

Yet, some writers say full-time freelance writing has never been so tough. Pay rates are consumed by inflation, some large fee magazines have closed, and larger numbers of writers make the work more competitive. Are you ready for that? Freelancing is not an easy endeavor for beginners, especially younger writers who may lack savvy business skills. Bottom line: A freelance writer is an independent contractor and, in essence, a small business operator.

Whether freelance writing becomes a good or bad experience, a full-time or part-time career, or a short-term or long-term commitment, is up to you. Now that you know the basics of writing features, this chapter focuses on steps to get your work published. This is where you become a professional writer.

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Branding and Marketing

In Chapter 5 discussing social media, you learned that these platforms and Web sites can be used to promote your personal brand as a writer and to tell the world about your latest works. They can drive readers to your work and to your publication. As a freelance writer, you must be aggressive about marketing your ideas and stories. This means promoting yourself as a writer and identifying the right markets for your work. It means being dedicated to promoting yourself and believing in what you do. It also means researching markets. It means knowing where to find opportunities to sell your writing. Effective freelance writers use all forms of news media to sell their work.

Sources for Finding Freelance Markets

Books:

- Gale Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media, Gale Research, Detroit, MI.
- Guide to Literary Agents, 30th edition, Writer's Digest Books, Penguin Random House, New York.
- Literary Market Place (agents), Information Today, Inc., Medford, NJ.
- O'Dwyer's Directory of Public Relations Executives, J. R. O'Dwyer, New York.
- Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, H. W. Wilson, Minneapolis, MN.
- Writer's Market, Writer's Digest Books, Penguin Random House, New York.
- Writer's Handbook, JP&A Dyson, London.

Periodicals:

- *Writer's Digest*, Penguin Random House, New York.

Successful marketing requires what publications are possible for you and knowing the guidelines for submission, how to communicate with editors about your ideas, and how to execute a professional-level submission. You must sell yourself on an individual level to people to strangers. You must promote yourself in the same manner a public relations specialist serves a client. As a freelance writer, you are your own client.

The ultimate freelance writing problem is matching the right subject with the right writer and the right publication. How do you do that? Freelance writing market directories and listings have been published to assist writers in finding the best markets for their work. Some have gone online and are available on the Web. Any freelancer should look at one or more of these market directories.

At the top of the list is the annual *Writer's Market* (Brewer, 2021), the number one source for nonfiction freelance writers. This 900-plus page volume is published

each fall and lists several thousand publication markets for articles – consumer and trade magazines, contests, and awards – and publishers and literary agents for books. The *Writer's Handbook* (Dyson, 2021), published by JP&A Dyson and firstwriter.com in London, notes several thousand magazines, book publishers, agents, and similar markets for manuscripts. This directory also lists a table of more than 3,000 authors and includes about 600 genres. Like *Writer's Market*, it is updated annually. Another popular resource is *Gale's Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media*, lists more than 60,000 media organizations, including 18,000 international listings.

You cannot depend just on print and online directories to find markets. You must network and develop your own contacts in the profession. The more people – especially editors – that you know, the better. Attend professional meetings, for example, to make such contacts.

"Editors have one goal that overrides all others," said California author and freelance writer Gordon Burgett (1997, p. 7), "to fill their pages with copy and artwork so good that it will leave the reader begging for more (and, where appropriate, asking to renew and extend their subscriptions). To achieve this, they look for tight, well-crafted, accurate articles that fill their particular needs."

To meet those needs, you must be patient. You must be organized enough to market several ideas and work on several assignments at the same time. Sometimes you develop an idea and just cannot find the right market at the beginning of the project. Put the topic on hold for a while if you can. While you are working on other writing projects that have more easily found markets, your solution to the tough one might come along.

"Don't be afraid to start at the bottom by writing for free. And don't ever say, 'I'd love to be a writer, but I just don't have time.' Writers make time. They don't spend time playing with friends on weekends. They neglect their families more than they should. They don't have time for anything else but writing," said successful Southern California freelance writer Andy Rathbone. "Writers must be able to keep writing, even when the spark's not there. You've got to get some clay on the table; you can always go back and shape it later. Finally, I'll spit out the old cliché: People don't choose writing as a career; writing chooses them." (Personal communication to author, January 17, 1998)

If all else fails, try to locate people who work or are interested in the subject you have chosen for a story. Ask them what they read. Find out their favorite publications. Their answers could give you an idea of new markets. This boils down to persistence. If you keep trying, eventually the effort might be rewarded with an acceptance letter and, later, a tearsheet and check.

Trying the Market

Many freelance writers start out building a relationship with newspapers in their communities. Some start with weeklies and small dailies. And Web sites devoted to local news are good organizations to try, too, if small newspapers are not available. Others break right in with the major daily newspapers in nearby metropolitan markets. Finding full-time positions with newspapers is more difficult today with

shrinking staff. Certainly, freelance opportunities are out there in newspapers, even if less full-time work can be found.

Most newspaper editors like to establish a regular relationship with their freelancers. Editors want to be able to find a writer for fast response on assignments they initiate. They do not want to wait for stories to come to them in many cases, although they most always consider unsolicited submissions.

Mary Rajkumar, an editor in charge of international enterprise reporting and special projects for The Associated Press, hires established stringers on a part-time basis more often than occasional freelancers who are not as well known to her and her global news service.

"We do not take a lot of strictly freelance copy because we have an extensive worldwide staff of 600 reporters. However, we do have a large network of stringers, who essentially write for us on a retainer basis. When I get a pitch from a freelancer, I want it to be something I've never heard of before and something that really tells me about the place. I also want it to be clear. With freelancers, as with reporters, I don't want subjects; I want story ideas. Example of a subject: Ivory trafficking in Africa. Example of a story idea: The growing demand for ivory from China's middle class has led to a rise in trafficking in Ethiopia and the death of large numbers of African elephants. The clearer and more unusual the pitch, the better the chance of it being accepted," Rajkumar, an award-winning journalist and native of Singapore, explained.

"I also appreciate stringers who understand the news process. For example, it's a given that a story without photos will not work for us and the stringer should get in touch with our photo department to find out just what kind of photos will work. In fact, we might even want audio and video. Stringers also need to understand length—that we are not a magazine—and focus. And they need to be willing to do rewrites."

Rajkumar, a former editor and reporter for the *San Jose Mercury News*, *Oakland Tribune*, and the *Miami Herald*, said there is an important role for features. "I see demand in two very different areas—quick, short breaking news and thoughtful, authoritative features that make sense of the barrage of information we get every day," she noted. (Personal communication to author, October 28, 2008)

The number of news Web sites, magazines, and newsletters being published sometimes may seem overwhelming. It is quite an effort to keep track of the many opportunities that exist for freelance feature writers. With thousands of magazines in the United States and Canada and thousands more outside North America, there are many different magazine markets for freelance writers. Freelancers must make an effort to learn about publications serving areas of their writing interests, and those which are local.

First, there are the most visible consumer magazines. There are also thousands of trade, technical, and professional publications. Freelance writers should always consider the opportunities available outside of the mainstream publications. Although many freelancers may dream of writing for the big fees paid by *The New Yorker, Esquire, National Geographic, People,* or *Reader's Digest*, it is not realistic for most beginners to shoot so high. Instead, it is wise to look at less competitive markets. Many freelance writers begin their writing careers with smaller magazines, newsletters, and local Web sites, or those with specializations with which they are familiar. Earnings for stories are much lower, generally. You do not have to be a

specialist, but if you have some expertise, use it. This is especially beneficial to beginners looking for that first break.

Denver freelance writer Henry Pratt believes that the thousands of trade publications are a strong option that is "often overlooked" by feature writers (Pratt, 1992, p. 10). There seem to be trade periodicals for just about any imaginable subject. Trade publications—those periodicals serving business and industry with stories about news, trends, people, new technology, and research in a particular field—are often open to new writers more easily than consumer publications, Pratt said. "Writing articles for trade journals is fun and profitable, if you take the time to know your customer—the publication, its audience, and the industry. [T]rade journals offer writers greater security. Such trades tend to be more stable, and they're not bought or sold as often as some consumer publications. You'll find trade journals are hungry for articles, practical columns, charts, graphs, and photos. Since most have small staffs, the editors depend heavily on freelancers for much of their prose and visuals," he said (Pratt, 1992, p. 10).

Magazine writer Eric Friedman (1997) listed seven important parts of a magazine that a writer should check when deciding about a submission. He recommended looking at the following:

- Masthead (the fewer names, the better for freelancers)
- Biographical notes (what do they tell you about the writers that the publication uses?)
- Table of contents (look at the article types and topics)
- Text (read it and note slant, length, tone, and style)
- Timeliness (are news pegs part of these articles?)
- Artwork (what accompanies the articles?)
- Audience (check the advertising and letters to the editor for hints)

Other small magazines offer good publishing opportunities also. There are a growing number of magazines of limited regional or local circulation that remain options for beginning writers, argued freelance writer Eric Mathews (1991). "In terms of eccentricities, anomalies, and just generally strange publishing practices, these publications, often 'seat-of-the-pants' operations, can be the ultimate test of a writer's patience and professionalism," he said (p. 23). Finding these magazines may be a challenge, but they are often listed in magazine market directories and writers' magazines such as *Writer's Digest* and *The Writer*.

With very small staffs, some only one-person operations, these publications also need contributors. A growing magazine market in recent years has been regional parenting magazines and Web sites. Ohio independent writer Mark Haverstock noted that there may be as many of these in North America. "This is a wide-open market for writers, because most of these parenting publications rely heavily on freelance submissions," Haverstock (1993, p. 6) said. These publications seek practical feature articles about local activities, places to get help, and advice about childcare. *Atlanta Parent, Chicago Parent,* and *Seattle's Child* are just three examples.

Regardless of the size or type of the publication, study it and learn as much about it and the market as you can before approaching it. "Target your material to the proper market; know the magazine you want to write for. Magazines are much like people. Each is different, with a distinctive personality and special needs. It's folly to dash off

a piece and then frenetically search for a suitable market for it," said freelancer John Bohannon (1993, p. 22). "One of the most common complaints editors have about freelancers—and it is a justifiable one—is that they're unfamiliar with the market," agreed Oklahoma full-time freelance writer Charlotte Anne Smith (1993, p. 16).

Selling to Online Markets

The point has been made that there are numerous new opportunities with online publications and social media. Print publications that have been transformed into online formats as well as publications that are solely available online offer markets for writers. They have also established different levels of visibility on social media platforms. These publications seek new material, but not always the same things you might prepare for print feature-oriented publications. Online publications and social are seeking multimedia content such as video. This means content must be produced for devices such as smartphones, tablets, and other handheld communication tools. Online writers today must be ready to prepare their written feature story with supporting digital photographs, audio, video, and narratives over still photo slide shows, maps, and even original illustrations.

This is a minimum. Sophisticated online publications seek broadcast-quality audio and video clips, such as portions of interviews with key individuals. Editors want Web links to other related sites and other ways to enhance your story's interactive experience. Thus, feature writers, either staff or freelance, who can produce content for an online publication must have multiple talents.

Shooting still digital photographs and video, recording audio clips, and creating graphics may become a routine part of the assignment for an online publication. "It's a mistake to assume that editors of Web-based media want the same material you'd produce for that quaint wood-pulp-based medium," advised science author and retired professor Michael Ray Taylor (1998, pp. 18–19). "The Web is still in its infancy; so far no one has figured out exactly what message its audience wants. But what has become increasingly clear is that the online audience doesn't want to read traditional magazine articles thrown across a computer screen."

Opportunities in International Markets

A final piece of advice on freelance opportunities should focus on international freelance markets. The Web and social media have made the world one big writing market in many ways. Start with regions of the world where the language and culture are similar. It will be much easier to begin this way. There are numerous opportunities to write about your home region and country for another news organization in another country.

In non-English-language nations, opportunities also exist. Many publications, if they are interested in the proposed story, will translate it into the native language or they may even have an English-language section or edition. There is clearly interest in what is happening in the United States. Some personality-oriented publications in Europe, Asia, and Latin America, for instance, are a steady market for Hollywood-based writers who focus on the motion picture industry. Same with technology. It is a global subject with many businesses such as Google, Amazon, Microsoft, and Apple operating all over the world. Some U.S. freelance travel writers, for example, regularly sell articles to publishers of in-flight magazines for foreign airlines that have

routes connecting to the United States. Although it may take considerable effort to become established in such a market, it is worthwhile.

There are also many English-language newspapers in major cities around the world that seek new content. There are dozens of such newspapers in Asia, Europe, and other parts of the world that provide additional writing opportunities for freelancers.

Selling Your Work Using Online Media

Writers today must use all the tools available to them to make their work, abilities, and specializations known to individuals who may want to hire them. Use the Web. Use social media. Use e-mail. And continue to use "old media" such as telephones and personal networking.

Web sites and social media should promote you and your work. Develop your own site emphasizing your name. Perhaps purchase your name as a domain name and use it as your Web business address and business e-mail address. Post contact information and develop a page form for inquiries and messages about what you do. Let readers know you are a for-hire freelance writer and what kinds of writing you do best. If you have specializations, list them. If you have been published, list the best places where your work has appeared with links or full-text stories. Include a page that is a portfolio of your best work, perhaps using links to online versions of your work. Devote another page to your professional resume and credentials. Some writers even include a page of praise and comments about their work.

E-mail works well to get in touch with potential outlets. Some writers create unique e-mail addresses for their freelance work that are quite different from their personal e-mail addresses.

Social media play a critical role in promoting the work of freelance writers. The platforms and their pages make it easy for editors to find you and your writing and your specialization. Be visible with online groups, too, such as newsgroups, chat rooms, and writers' distribution lists. Align yourself with online writer's groups and their Web sites. Join them. Be listed. Be available.

Using Submission Guidelines

When you have identified a publication that might be right for your work, contact editor, acquisitions editor, or articles editor to obtain a set of submission guidelines. Although newspapers rarely develop printed guidelines, many magazines have posted these guidelines on their Web sites if they seek unsolicited submissions. Some editors will send them by e-mail to freelancers on request. One of the most popular outdoors magazines in Pennsylvania, *Pennsylvania Angler & Boater,* is the state of Pennsylvania's Fish and Boat Commission bi-monthly publication. Editors offer online guidelines for writers and are available to any freelance writer on the magazine's Web site (https://www.fishandboat.com/Transact/AnglerBoater/Documents/PaAnglerBoaterGuidelines.pdf). Typical submission guidelines include information

about subjects for stories that will appeal to editors and readers, writing style, procedures for submitting work including images, the content of images, deadlines, correspondence, publishing rights, and getting paid.

Pitches and Queries

Some editors like to call them queries. Some prefer pitches. In recent years, the number of digital pitches and queries—the way writers offer their ideas to editors—at publications has grown whereas the number of traditional mail pitches and queries has declined. Communication with the editors and their assistants is in transition. The reason is the growth in use of e-mail, and the Web. Generally, larger publications are more digitized for submissions while smaller ones may be digital or a mixture.

Publications today have become part of the networked world. Their presence on the Internet includes Web sites and electronic mail addresses. *Smithsonian Magazine*, the flagship publication of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, accepts unsolicited proposals from established freelance writers for features and some departments for the magazine. It publishes information for print writers at https://www.smithsonianmag.com/contact/smithsonian-magazine-article-submissions. For writers interested in smithsonianmag.com, information for pitches is at https://www.smithsonianmag.com/contact/smithsonian-magazine-online-article-submissions. Both Web site pages offer a story pitch form. Writers are asked for identifying and contact information, social media sites, where else have they published, links to previously published stories, the *Smithsonian* site section that might best work, a pitch title, and the pitch itself. For *Smithsonian*, pitches are limited to 250 words.

Using a Web site such as this is a great convenience for both freelance writers and editors. Some editors and their staff can be reached through e-mail. Whether a Web page form or e-mail is used often depends on submission volume. "Due to the volume of submissions, we cannot guarantee a response to all inquiries, but if we are interested in pursuing a story, we will contact you," Smithsonian's editors (*Smithsonian Magazine*, 2022) tell potential submitters.

Numerous publications and their editors prefer e-mail for submissions, for contact with regular contributors, and for contact with new writers. This creates a communication quandary for freelance writers. Do writers submit pitch and query letters and proposals through e-mail? Or do writers use more conventional printed documents and regular mail approaches? The answers to those questions will depend on the individual editor and the policies of the publication. Most editors prefer to use e-mail because it is faster and less formal. This enables them to reply more quickly than through traditional methods. Check the online submission guidelines or telephone the editorial office and follow the instructions.

The safest approach is to use conventional submission approaches when no contact information, advice, or guidelines are available. Often a telephone call will get the information needed—such as a name and e-mail address for the editor in charge of submissions.

New York writer and editor Greg Daugherty (2001) said that using e-mail properly will win assignments for freelance writers but can also be costly if handled poorly. "I've seen beginning writers send in lively queries that won them assignments—practically by return e-mail," Daugherty, a freelance writer specializing in personal finance,

retirement, and consumer topics, wrote (p. 28). "I've also seen otherwise terrific writers flub it by making mistakes they would have never made in conventional paper queries." (Daugherty, 2001, p. 28)

If you use e-mail, remember to use an e-mail address that can be accessed for a response and monitor that e-mail regularly for responses. Daugherty (2001) also recommended these tips:

- Confirm that the publication accepts e-mail queries.
- Query with a strong idea.
- Use a formal voice, not the informal or casual voice often used in e-mail.
- Spell-check and grammar-check the message before sending it.
- Use the subject line to include the word "query."
- Provide your contact information such as telephone and fax numbers.
- Offer writing samples, but only send them if requested.
- Offer your resume, but only send it if requested.
- Send queries one at a time; don't use multiple addresses for a single query.
- Be patient about response time; wait about two weeks.
- Save your sent queries for reference.

Creating Pitches and Queries

One of the most important aspects of selling articles is how you conduct yourself as a professional writer. Writers should maintain a professional attitude in how they work with editors. This involves knowing the standards for preparing and submitting freelance work. Following the general market and specific publication research, it is time to contact the publication. Being professional is an attitude, but it is also performing at a high level when this first contact is made (Smith, 1993).

Former *Writer's Digest* editor Thomas Clark (1995) emphasized that an effective inquiry to a magazine, regardless of the form it takes, is the single most important sales tool that writers can use. "A successful query letter gets the client to say yes," Clark said (p. 22). "And that's the only real goal of any sales tool." Clark said writers should include five essential ingredients in each pitch or query: a working title, a projected length, the idea's role within the publication's departments, reference to previous articles, and the results of some of the initial research done for the story.

The right attitude about rejection is also important in freelance writing. Writers must learn to live with it. It happens to every writer. A publication's decision not to use a submitted manuscript or idea proposal does not always mean the work is not up to par. It could mean that there were other reasons for not using it. However, many inexperienced writers do not contemplate the reason offered for a rejection, if it is specific, and give up on the idea. Writer Richard Matthews (1991), like many other successful and persistent writers, explained the next step is not giving up, but revising, refocusing, and resubmitting to "another publication that might be receptive to the same general idea tailored to its editorial content" (p. 22). "Restructuring an idea with a different set of readers in mind often meets with success the second time around," he said. A distinction between an amateur freelancer and a real

professional, Matthews said, is how you handle the rejection pile. The worst thing to do is to let an idea sit around, he said.

There are numerous reasons editors reject or substantially revise accepted ideas and manuscripts. Veteran Southern California freelance writer and author John M. Wilson (1990) identified at least nine reasons for failure. Manuscripts with flaws, he said, are just unfinished works. Rejected writers simply need to work further to solve the problems. He has created a pre-submission checklist that can be helpful in preventing such errors the first time around:

- Angle and focus of the story
- Appropriate viewpoint and voice
- Vivid description
- Logical organization
- Style in writing
- Lead that attracts and a distinct, impressive ending
- Appealing direct quotations
- Manuscript must reflect what editor assigned
- Edit and proofread thoroughly

As a writer seeking a publisher, you must go further than discovering a subject for an article. A subject is simply not enough in the highly competitive writing world. The American Society of Journalists and Authors, Inc. (ASJA) argued that the idea is one step toward the finished product (Bloom et al., 1992). An idea is a subject combined with an approach, ASJA said. This is your property, even if you do not have the story written yet.

A Writer Works with Editors

Capt. Vincent Daniello is a veteran freelance writer based in New Hampshire. While he lives in a land-locked portion of New England, his specialization is deep-water fishing and boating. After all, he spent much of his professional life in South Florida and the Caribbean. A U.S. Coast Guard-licensed master upon any ocean for vessels up to 500 tons and an International Game Fishing Association certified tournament observer, he has turned his substantial career in saltwater fishing and boating into a writing life. He writes regularly for specialized magazines such as *Yachting, Motor Boating, SaltWater Sportsman*, and contributes to online fishing sites and boating television programs. He writes about ocean fishing adventures, prepares new marine product summaries and reviews, describes fishing and yachting destinations for travelers, and writes about major fishing tournaments. With his experience working with editors, he has some solid recommendations to new writers who hope to break into magazine and newspaper writing:

> Fresh story ideas are what every editor I know wants.

To pitch an idea, start with a lead just as you would in a feature story, but be bolder and maybe a bit longer than you might for a feature. This is your one and only chance to show the editor that you do, in fact, know how to write. But you had better already have the editor's attention by the time you get there, by about your third period.

Editors want to be entertained by someone's writing (anyone's writing) for at least a minute or two. Anecdotal leads work because they immediately involve the reader. (My editor tells me to "bring the reader aboard," in this case literally, since I write about boats, but figuratively as well.) Unfortunately, that Pulitzer candidate lead you write may be gutted or cut all together on shorter stories, so never fall in love with your leads. They will break your heart.

After the lead to your query, you need a nut. Tell the editor where you intend to take your story, just as you would tell a reader. With a good nut, the editor knows you've thought this idea through, and can pull it off if given the assignment. Without a nut, you may have a great idea, but coaxing a story out of an idea is the last thing an editor wants to do. Even bad writing can be fixed, but it must be written first.

Along these same lines, tell the editor how you will research your story. Who will you interview and why? Where will you look for additional information? But on the other hand, don't be too rigid. If you lock into one story line and the editor envisions something different for the magazine, your query is headed for the circular file. Show you can get the job done but leave the details vague.

You could suggest where your article might fit in the magazine, but editors know where the piece will fit. A better way to show you know the publication is to relate your story to something in a recent issue. You could also suggest a word count—but never offer a page length. You run the risk, though, that the word count may be way off what the editor wants, which could kill an otherwise perfect fit for your idea.

Give your credentials: "I'm a journalism student at the University of Miami." (That might be presumed to mean a grad student, so don't say you're not. Be judged by your writing.) I've *been published* in X, Y, and Z. I have attached clips. If given this assignment, I can have the story done in approximately (number of weeks).
A few closing tips:

- Check online or call for writers' guidelines—and use them. Also check past issues.
- Look for ideas you have unique knowledge of, and write your lead in first person, unless the magazine never runs first-person stories.
- When you think you are done, shorten by 10 or 15 percent.

- Never, ever, ever use less than 12-point type. (I often get edited stories back in 14- and sometimes 16-point type. This is the future you are choosing.)
- Try higher-paying magazines. If they pay writers more, they pay editors more, which means more experienced editors who are confident in their skills and won't shy away from inexperienced writers with good ideas. (Refer to my first sentence—every editor is looking for fresh ideas—from anywhere.)

Just make sure your idea and your writing are up to the standards of the magazine you pitch too. After a few rejected queries, a family friend told me this. He was a senior vice president at Doubleday. His advice worked. My next query landed a $700 assignment. (Personal communication to author, December 8, 2008).

Once you get a good story idea, you must decide when and where it is best to market it. Writers should not try to pitch or query a publication by telephone. Most professionals prepare a e-mail message or letter, or they will submit a longer idea proposal. Some freelance writers combine a cover letter and proposal into a single document but, for your purposes as a novice, you should consider them separate steps. A pitch or query letter is briefer, less detailed, and an abstract of the fuller proposal.

If you have refined the idea, then develop a separate proposal running several hundred words that summarizes what you plan to do. Your basic strategy is to develop the idea – to describe to an editor what you will do or have done – without writing or sending the entire article. This is a more detailed outline of the story you plan to write. Editors find these helpful in determining whether your work would fit their plans for an upcoming issue.

San Diego freelancer Andy Rathbone pitches his ideas to editors this way: "First, get the publication's proper name, address, and writer's guidelines. Usually, the weary receptionist will recite these over the phone. Next, grab as many back issues as you can find at local thrift shops or a condominium's magazine-swap pile. Your story must fit into a magazine's specific area, or the editor won't take it. Next, write a query letter with a grabbing first graph, followed by a short description of the story, as well as the reason why you are the best person to write it. Rules? Make sure it all fits on one page. If you can't sum it up in one page, you haven't found a decent angle for the story. If they haven't followed up in a month, send a follow-up letter. After 45 days, I'll give them a phone call. Don'ts? Don't call the publication unless it's to get their address and current editor's name. Editors don't like being bugged over the phone. And for crying out loud, don't spell anything wrong, either! Editors don't want to work and if they see any misspellings, they know they're in for some serious revisions on the manuscript," Rathbone advised (Personal communication to author, January 17, 1998)

Although most stories need proposals or pitches to precede them, some do not. Editors work in different ways. You must know the market and editors' preferences. For editorials, humorous anecdotes and briefs, and most other articles less than 1,000 words, a query is

not as useful as the finished piece, literary agent Linda Collier Cool said. She also stressed that query letters must be convincing. "[B]efore you begin writing your query letter, think your article idea through carefully. Imagine you are describing the article to a friend. Could you get the point across in just a few words?" she asked (Cool, 1985a, p. 24).

Success in the Submission Game

David A. Fryxell (2000a), an Arizona writer who has published more than 1,000 newspaper and magazine stories, said the format of a submission does not matter as much as what the submission says. He argues that editors are more concerned about the lead, the focus, grammar, and overall quality. The submission, whether it is in digital form or on paper, should be clean and readable. His tips follow:

- Content matters more than format.
- Most editors want a digital version of your manuscript.
- E-mail attachments may be infected with viruses, so check all files and make sure the publication will accept them.
- Sending the manuscript as text within an e-mail will usually eliminate formatting but can be received by almost everyone.
- Send manuscripts in the most common readable formats (such as rich text format, or.rtf, and text, or.txt).

Some editors prefer only pitch letters on first contact. If their initial response to your letter is positive, you might be asked to produce a proposal or an entire story. The problem with many pitch letters, veteran freelancer Lorene Hanley Duquin (1987) said, is that the letter writers do not know what they are really proposing. If you as a writer does not, how can you expect an editor to know?

Some editors like to see links to a writer's previously published stories, but they prefer ones about related subjects. In other words, highlight your qualifications. Previous experience as a writer means a lot. This is an effective way to establish your credibility as a serious freelance writer. If you have links, send them along.

Ideally, a query letter also includes the proposal. Or, if you prefer to be more highly organized, send a proposal with a covering query letter that introduces yourself to the editor by describing your qualifications and recent articles you have written. This more personal approach establishes your credibility as a serious professional writer. Duquin (1987) said a proposal is the result of a four-step system:

- *Capture*—When an idea strikes you, write it down to save it. When the time comes, it is there for you to take to the next step.
- *Develop*—Get more information. Think about the idea. Some preliminary research helps. Get the basic facts. Conduct some interviews.
- *Tailor*—Shape the proposal to the audience that you are trying to reach. Decide who would be interested and devise a writing and reporting strategy that takes you to that goal.

- *Test*—Ask yourself these questions: Do you really want to do this article now? Are you capable? What is the cost (in time and money)? Can you find other uses for the material?

Read and study the publication you plan to pitch before you prepare the proposal. Call the magazine to get the name (and correct spelling) of the proper editor (they do change from time to time, and you cannot completely depend on annual directories or even online information to be up to date). Lorene Hanley Duquin (1987) said well-prepared and researched proposals get the best attention:

"If you've done your homework, you should have all the elements of a good query. Most editors recognize the time and preparation I put into my proposals, and they respond personally. More often than not the editor will like the idea but sees potential trouble spots. Since my proposal is well-developed, the editor can point to those spots and give me the guidance I need to research and write an article that will fit perfectly into the magazine's format," she said (Duquin, 1987, p. 40)

Cover letters and accompanying proposals must contain certain basics, regardless of how you organize it. Here's a list of information to include in a query letter:

- How to contact you (e-mail, Web site, mail address, and telephone).
- Your background as a writer and freelancer. (Do not reveal that you are a student or novice. Act professionally and you will be treated as a professional.)
- Your unique qualifications to write about this subject or idea.
- Your availability and probably schedule for completion of the assignment if you get it.
- A request for a response.

Most pitch letters are written in traditional business letter format. An appealing, curiosity-arousing opening may get an editor to read more. Letters with dull starts and mistakes are often not completely read. If you are writing a separate pitch or cover letter with a proposal, then the letter should be short and to the point. Story proposals should also have these elements:

- Summary of the idea and the approximate word length.
- Examples to illustrate your focus.
- Names and titles of primary expert sources you plan to interview.
- Facts and statistics from authoritative sources.
- Factors affecting freshness of material.
- Outline of story.
- Availability of digital photographs, professional video, and other content.

A proposal should be prepared much like a manuscript. This means it should be typed and free of errors. The depth of your proposal depends on the publication. Many want them short; others prefer details and depth. In essence, you have several options in pitching ideas. Some proposals are contained in detailed pitch letters. Some take the form of two-to-four-page essays. Others may be detailed outlines with other supplemental materials such as letters and descriptive essays.

Drafting a Story Proposal

The late Kit Snedaker, a Southern California freelance writer and cookbook author, sold stories about a wide range of food and travel subjects to many different markets during a writing career of more than 70 years. Some story proposals can be brief articles themselves, ranging from 750 to 1,000 words, to give the full flavor of the proposed article, possible sources, and so forth.

"My proposals are always accompanied by a covering letter telling what this is about, describing the enclosed clips and resume," Snedaker explained. She said she believes in keeping the proposal short for editors who have a lot to review each day. The following story proposal is one that Snedaker wrote about traditional Christmas in Germany and foods from the Old-World holiday season:

Kit Snedaker, home or business address, telephone number

Editor name, address, telephone

Current date

Nobody celebrates Christmas as enthusiastically as Germans. Christmas trees started there, so did Yule logs, Christmas stockings, Advent calendars, Christmas gingerbread, and "Silent Night."

Best of all, though, are the outdoor Christmas markets which open on November 30 and close December 24. Besides toys (many handmade), tree ornaments and gifts, the markets are dotted with food stalls selling Christmas marzipan, gingerbread, Dresden Stollen and Baumkuchen or tree cake.

Originally, it was baked on a spit, batter applied in layers. As each one browned, another was added. When the cake was cut, the edges of the brown layers looked like growth rings of a tree. A version of this, called Spettekka, is found in a small area of southern Sweden. Lithuanians also make a "tree cake" and the Basques in northern Spain bake a cake on a spit, too. Whatever it's called, this cake-baked-in-front-of-the-open-fire predates ovens and has to be the oldest, most interesting pastry in the world.

Doing a roundup of German Kriskindlemarkts and German Christmas food recently, I watched baumkuchen being made on electrified spits and learned how to do this crown jewel of German baking in a springform pan in my kitchen.

Along the way, I visited Berlin's 150-year-old market on the Kurfurstendamm, small, but festive. I saw the biggest Christmas market in Nuremberg, the oldest in Munich (creches are a tradition there), and the most sophisticated in Frankfurt. Not only markets, but entire towns, street cars, subways, airports, everything is covered with Christmas decorations. It looks as though the holiday was invented there and, in many ways, it was.

If you would like to see a story about: A German Christmas or German Christmas food, Christmas markets in Germany, or Baumkuchen, a story with a Christmas spirit that's older than Scrooge and Tiny Tim .... (Personal communication to author, January 23, 1998) (Reprinted with permission.)

Preparing Your Submission

Once a story has been queried or proposed, assigned, and written, you must prepare it in final form for submission to the editor. Because you have already been invited to submit the finished manuscript for a full review, you have good reason to do this job well. How well you prepare the manuscript and package is a strong indicator of the professional or unprofessional caliber of your work on the story. If you are sending the finished manuscript on speculation ("on spec"), that is, without any prior correspondence with the publication, you have an even better reason to attend to the details of submitting your story with professional care.

Generally, follow whatever guidelines you have been given by the publisher or that you may find on the publication's Web site. If you have none, there are some general standards. First, a cover letter is an important part of the final package you e-mail or mail to the publication. It should be business-like and stick to the point. No typos or grammar mistakes. All of this can help sell the manuscript that you send on speculation. It should make life easier for the editor handling your correspondence.

This means you must remember to help editors. You should be as detailed as possible with descriptions or summaries of earlier correspondence (include correspondence dates). "How you handle these [speculation and sale] and similar situations in a cover letter can help build the impression in the editor's mind that you are a professional who understands at least some of the ins and outs of publishing and the author–editor relationship," said editors and writers George Scithers and Sanford Meschkow (1985, p. 43).

What exactly do you send? Here's a list:

- *Cover letter*—This should describe what is enclosed and why. Remember that not all editors will remember the details of your project. Help them. This letter should also serve as a memorandum that explains any particulars of the work you have submitted. In e-mail, describe all file attachments and their contents.
- *The story*—The story should be clean (error-free), typed, and double-spaced. If you are using e-mail, the story file attachment should be provided in a commonly used word processor and file format (e.g., Microsoft Word or Apple Pages).
- *Artwork*—This includes any visual elements of your story, such as photographs (or negatives), tables, charts, illustrations and drawings, maps, and diagrams. Digital forms only. You may need to check submission guidelines for requirements. Include captions, credits, and explanatory notes, if needed, in a separate file. Do not insert any visual content in the story file. Editors want the text and images kept separately for production.
- *Archive*—Keep digital copies of everything. Your e-mail should save a copy for you, including all attachments. If it does not, change the settings. Save all digital files in the cloud or in a separate backup hard drive.

Editor David Fryxell (2001) advised checking to make sure the same idea has not already been done in a recent issue. Although it may seem obvious to experienced writers, it is also important to double-check the editor's name and spell it right. Brief and simple pitches work best, he advised. He also tells beginners not to worry about details, such as length or deadline, until an idea is accepted and then work out finer

points with the editor. Maintaining a professional demeanor is quite important, he said, and it is simply not wise to be rude or unprofessional to an editor.

Fryxell (2000b) also recommended five steps to increasing success with a submission. First, he said a freelance writer should study the publication of interest and copy its formula. Second, he advises freelancers not to ask editors to take chances on ideas. Propose ideas that fit the publication. Third, he said writers must sell themselves to the editors they contact. Show editors why you are qualified and have the right idea. Fourth, Fryxell said you need a professional approach. Writers must meet deadlines and other assignment specifications as well as finish the work with quality. Finally, he said writers who are successful must deliver. This means getting the work done as promised.

Tracking Submissions

Most writers have a system for keeping track of submissions. As you get more and more into your freelance writing, you will have a growing list of pending pitches and story submissions at the same time. You need to become organized to track these through the lengthy process of receipt, review, decision, publication scheduling, payment, and publication.

A simple chart on a sheet of paper tacked on the wall or something organized in a spreadsheet program such as Excel does the job, but even more sophisticated resources are also available. Some software companies sell project tracking software and "to do list" apps that are often free downloads. Some writing-oriented Web sites offer the service for free or for a minimal monthly use fee.

You can easily keep your records in a word processor file, in a spreadsheet file, or on a hard copy chart. Kit Snedaker offered the following items for every single story she submitted:

- The market (note overlapping readership)
- Name of the editor and contact information
- Date the query was sent
- The reply given to the query
- The submission date
- Acceptance or rejection decision
- Photographs or other graphics submitted
- Publication date
- Payments received (dates and amounts)
- Tearsheet or clipping received
- Photos returned (Personal communication to author, January 23, 1998)

Working with Editors

Every writer, whether a staff writer or freelancer, must work with an editor at some point in the writing and publishing process. The relationship is very close at some publications. At others, it seems nonexistent. Most editors are extremely helpful and can even teach their writers new tricks in the process of working with them. They are often willing to spend some time with you and give more precise direction on an

assignment. They can communicate what they want and do it in an organized manner. Some editors are impossible to work with, on the other hand. These misguided souls can lose manuscripts, fail to issue contracts, forget to pay writers, deny payment for legitimate expenses, renege on promises, and even introduce errors into stories during editing. Some have less personal integrity, too. This means some editors steal ideas, change their minds about accepting and using a manuscript, and even accept a manuscript, pay for it, and then never publish it.

Professor Peter Jacobi (1991) recommended a helpful, easy-to-remember checklist of one dozen writing characteristics, all beginning with the letter "C," which should gain greater success with editors during the submission process. He recommended being correct, clear, concise, cohesive, complete, constructive, consistent, concrete, credible, conversational, comfortable, and captivating. A writer who can accomplish all those goals will certainly make friends with editors and readers.

An Editor Works with Freelance Writers

When veteran magazine and newspaper editor Lisa Gibbs worked as *Miami Herald* business section executive editor, she oversaw a large group of writers and editors. She worked with staff writers and freelance writers daily. Gibbs is now director of News Partnerships for The Associated Press, known worldwide as AP, working on the newsroom's collaborations with foundations, emerging technology companies, and other media organizations. She also co-leads AP's strategic efforts to use automation and artificial intelligence in the newsroom.

"I supervised roughly 20 reporters and editors who produce business stories for print, Web, and radio. On Sunday, the Business section is a consumer-focused section called Money. On Monday, we produce one of the *Herald's* most popular sections, called Business Monday. We consider it our weekly magazine on local business. We produce a Friday Business Report for the local National Public Radio affiliate and partner. And we manage MiamiHerald.com/Business and all the Web pages that go with that. There, we report breaking news throughout the day, and we maintain special databases, such as a Salary Comparison tool where people can enter their salaries anonymously and search the results. We also have a consumer help desk called Action Line that answers readers' questions," Gibbs explained.

"My main job is setting the coverage priorities for the team. As the head of the department, I also deal with the budget, personnel issues, and other strategic initiatives for the company. I find I go to a tremendous number of meetings. I also visit with the community, meeting with business leaders, moderating panels on the economy and networking.

"My two favorite things are going out into the community and working with reporters on stories. I am a reporter at heart and when I go meet with business leaders, I am looking for tips I can bring back to my reporters. And, of course, talking to reporters about the news, the kinds of stories we should do and how best to shape them, developing important stories for the front page, and

working with the actual copy to make it good – that's at the core of what we do," Gibbs said.

"In my department, we try to focus on scoops and enterprise. Scoops – breaking news that will surprise people as well as reporting the news of the day. One of my reporters also refers to the "insight scoop" – putting the news in a perspective that makes people think. Enterprise is the features end of things, developing investigative and feature stories. This is a major part of what we do. Our weekly magazine contains primarily features, including a "cover story," and we write regular features for the front page as well as our own Business section.

"We use freelancers to supplement our coverage, particularly for our Sunday and Monday sections. Generally, the freelance pieces are company profiles. Usually, we assign the stories to the freelancers based on ideas we have that staff can't get to, although of course freelancers do pitch their own ideas. The freelancers are usually local writers who understand our community."

Gibbs explained that she mostly assigns work for freelance writers rather than depend on their pitches because the section's editorial priorities are usually very specific.

"We also work with freelancers from Latin America and, in those cases, are more likely to accept their pitches, since they know their own region better than we do. They often take their own photos and even on some occasions provide audio and video. In that case, we buy the whole package. The quality of freelance writers is inconsistent. Some turn in very clean, nicely written material and others require lots of editing. For that reason, when we find a good freelancer, we stick with them. Freelancers need to work with us to help us schedule photos, and we ask them to write up boxes and to provide data for charts and multimedia components where appropriate. It goes without saying, I'm sure, but good freelancers meet deadlines, keep in regular communication with editors about their progress, and fact-check their work," she stated. (Personal communication to author, September 28, 2008)

Providing Digital Visual Content

Although you might fancy yourself as a writer, you might find yourself in a position to be a photographer or graphic artist, or to work in some other form of visual communication. This happens frequently when a publication does not, or cannot, provide a photographer for your assignment. To strengthen your position to make a sale, you should consider whether photographs or other artwork will make a difference. Publications require digital visual content. With the decreasing cost and convenience of use of quality digital cameras, photography becomes a viable option for some freelance writers. If you can create your own professional-quality digital images, it will strengthen your submission. If you cannot, you should not submit below-par photographs with strong writing.

At a minimum, you should suggest visual elements to accompany your story. This may help your editor. You know the material best and can propose potential subjects for photographs, illustrations, graphs, tables, charts, maps, and diagrams that a professional can prepare. You should not have to pay for this service, but you should discuss it at the time of the pitch if it is unclear. A freelance travel story is not as enticing without photographs of people strolling the palm-lined beach or hiking the snow-capped mountains. A how-to article or science article is far more understandable with visual content such as diagrams.

You may be interested in doing your own photographic or informational graphics work. It takes skill development, just like writing. Another solution is to team up with a freelance photographer and graphic artist if you are expected to provide the artwork. As you begin to increase the frequency of your freelance work, you may get acquainted with freelance photographers and other visual artists. Teaming up can create a strong offering to an editor that might lead to more good opportunities for everyone involved.

Do not forget that you may be expected to write the first drafts of the cutlines, or captions, of the visual content you submit. These can be short, simple, left-to-right identifications of people in the photographs, or they can be more thorough explanations of procedures and other subjects of the artwork. They should also include credits. A publication's style dictates how you handle the cutlines – short or long, tight or descriptive, individual or combined, general or detailed – so be sure to familiarize yourself with the way the editor handles these elements.

Pros and Cons of Free-lance Work

Sally-Jo Bowman (1996), a freelance writer and contributor to *Writer's Digest*, has given a lot of thought to full-time freelance work. She lists four steps to going full-time: (a) put together a mission statement for your career, (b) start it part-time and gain experience, (c) examine the financial side of the matter, and (d) weigh the positive and negative:

Pros:	*Cons:*
No commutes.	You must pay your own benefits, insurance.
Family nearby.	You generate all revenue.
No one to ask for time off.	There may be no checks.
Lower clothing expenses.	There are some tax disadvantages.
Work at odd, quiet hours.	There is no maintenance or supply to help.
Tax breaks for home offices.	Unfinished work, deadlines are always near.
Weather is no factor in going to work.	No paid vacations or sick pay.
No one knows if you are in a bad mood.	The work can be lonely.
Large checks sometimes arrive.	People think you aren't working, interrupt.
Master of your own fate.	Feast or famine in terms of income.

Producing Multiple Stories

A wise and efficient freelance feature writer can develop more than one distinct story from research, reporting, and interviews on a subject. If you can do this, you will develop more income from your investment in time and resources. This is the result of organization and planning. If you are going to make a 500-mile three-day trip for one story—and spend money on transportation, food, and lodging—try to develop a second or third story prospect for the same trip. Often it is no additional expense to add a second or even a third project; all you give up is additional time.

It is smart to consider different markets. "When I realized I'd grossed about five cents an hour on my first big writing assignment, I knew I had to mend my ways," wrote freelancer Valerie Zehl (1998, p. 24). What was her solution? She began to take research done for one article and apply it to other articles. "I turned an idea on its head and shook out a few other ideas," Zehl explained.

And she sold them. Zehl said the technique of re-slanting, reselling, and recycling work gets more revenue from it. "Recycling an idea into many re-slants and re-sales is a profitable use of a writer's time and research. With a little imagination and energy, the recycling—and the generating of additional income—from one body of research can go on and on" (Zehl, 1998, p. 25).

There are several ways to focus on a subject. Each may represent a story. Focus on both general markets and specialized markets. A general market approach for a story on managing personal finances varies a great deal from the specific market approach that a banking magazine interested in a story about personal bankers would take. Furthermore, consider proposing longer stories in parts. In this way, you are selling two, perhaps shorter, stories instead of one longer one. You may earn more for such a sale, but this depends on the rate structure.

The Freelance Work Ethic

For many college students and other beginning nonfiction writers, chances are good that you have never been paid for your work. That will happen. For some of you, it may happen before you finish school. For others, it might take a while to find the match between a publication that needs a story on a particular subject and your original treatment of that subject.

Critical to any freelance writer's success is making and meeting deadlines and writing well. And keeping promises. Doing the work that was assigned. Writers lose assignments when they have a reputation for missing deadlines. They will not get many second chances. Writing mechanics, such as grammar, are also vital to a freelancer writer's success. LinkedIn news editor Melissa Cantor stresses the importance of this to all writers each time she talks with or meets with them. "As far as working with freelancers, I am shocked by how many writers don't meet deadlines and how many people want to be writers but don't even have a basic grasp of grammar," Cantor (personal communication to author, October 1, 2008) stated. Cantor, a former magazine senior editor, also notes that story proposals, or pitches, that she receives were not always appropriate for her magazine. And, she says, she found some writers who submitted ideas and proposals to her have not learned anything about the magazine. "I get terrible pitches that have no

relationship to the magazine I work for, and I definitely never risk working with a writer who hasn't previously bothered to research the publication and tailor their idea to it," she said.

Getting Paid for Your Work

Serious freelance writers should set financial goals for their work. This simply means figuring out any out-of-pocket expenses in reporting and writing the story and deciding how much your time is worth. "Profit is revenues minus expenses. Revenues should cover expenses … and leave a little over for profit. Work smarter, not harder. Get paid your due," advised freelance writer and author Jeffery D. Zbar (2002, p. 52). "In small business America, including the professional writing community, the same is true. It is essential to sell your product at a fee that guarantees your expenses will be covered and that you will have something left over to save or enjoy."

Freelance writers earn varying amounts of money for their efforts. As you start writing for pay, you will notice very different degrees of how you are paid, how much you are paid, and even how fast you are paid. Checks and direct deposit are the standard, of course, although a few freelance writers may trade or barter for their services. Payments are issued to freelancers at various times in the publishing process, but most often after the article is completed, submitted, and accepted for publication. Some publications pay only after the article is printed. On major projects that involve long periods of time, writers should seek an advance or a partial payment in the middle of the project. You must ask for this because most editors will not usually offer such a convenience.

Most professional freelancers include an invoice with their final drafts when they are submitted. You need to pay attention to such matters because you will likely have several projects going simultaneously and may lose track of who has paid for what. Setting up a spreadsheet will help you to do this. Sending written reminders to be paid are not out of line after a grace period of 30 days. After that, send a reminder by mailing a copy of the original invoice to your editor. Editors get busy and occasionally forget to submit payment requests to the publication's business department. Writer Tana Reiff (1987a, 1987b) said freelance writing businesses are no different from any other one-person businesses. Be your own accountant and practice the basics of good accounting. It will save you money in the long run.

Many beginning freelance writers are paid whatever their editors decide is the going rate. They never question or negotiate fees. This works well enough if you are primarily interested in obtaining clips and building a professional resume, especially, if you have an alternative means of support. Eventually, most freelancers begin to take fees as serious business.

Writers should weigh whether to bargain for bigger fees, veteran freelance writer Linda Berkhoudt O'Connor (1996) suggested. Negotiating with editors can bring better arrangements than simply accepting what is offered, she stated. Negotiations do not have to be about the fee. Discussions can include expenses, deadlines, and even the direction of the content. But most important, O'Connor said, she has upped her income by 50% by speaking up at the time of reaching an agreement with an editor. Houston freelance writer Connie Steitz Fox agreed: "[W]hen the rent is due, or you want to work at a higher level of professionalism, you need a more assertive approach." (Fox, 1993, p. 6)

Gregg Levoy, a veteran freelance magazine writer and author, said you need to constantly review what you get paid for your work and ask for more as you gain experience. Negotiating is essential to getting paid what you are worth, he argued. "When breaking into a magazine—writers should take whatever terms are offered," Levoy wrote. "Continuing this practice after breaking in, however, is like turning down raises." (Levoy, 1991, p. 26)

Freelancers must be willing to negotiate for their time and creativity. Editors of most publications set fees for a lot of reasons. For example, they have budgets for freelancers and can spend only so much, or they pay depending on a writer's level of experience. They may have still other reasons. Connie Steitz Fox said there are several factors to remember when setting freelance fees.

Consider these factors: What is the market value of your product or service? What is your cost of doing business? What would constitute a fair profit? How much training do you have? How many years of experience do you have? How much natural ability? Do you have expertise in related fields? Can you help to further your client's business goals, including their goal of increased profits? Fox wrote. (1993, p. 6)

Tom Yates (1995), a freelance writer for daily newspapers and national magazines, offered three rules about fees. First, set the rates in advance. Second, include any income taxes you might expect to pay in the fee. And third, set aside the tax portion of the fee and save it for the day you pay your income tax bills. These recommendations are given with the assumption that expenses are not part of the fee. If they are, he said, you must estimate the costs of anything that might be used and money spent in pursuit of the article—business costs such as office space and overhead, telephone and postage, and travel, but also personal expenses such as food and housing.

There are four general ways of being paid for freelance work. Each one is different and, if you have a choice in the matter, requires that you consider which works best in your own situation. Here are your choices:

- Agree to a flat fee for the completion of a particular writing project. This is the most common way for editors to handle freelance assignments. For instance, you write an article of certain agreed-on specifications, and you get paid whatever amount is established. This does not always take into consideration how much time it takes you to complete the assignment. You do, however, have the option of renegotiating the fee if you and your editor discover the assignment will take more time and effort than originally anticipated. Flat fee arrangements also do not include expenses. Under this arrangement, expenses are the writer's responsibility.
- Be paid by the hour on the assignment. This may be the preferred method from the writer's point of view because it may not be certain how much time is needed to finish an assignment. This approach also requires you to decide how much your time is worth per hour or per day on the open market, Most publications will not work this way and, if one does, it will set a limit for total costs. The rate itself depends on the cost of living in a particular region of the country, the size of the publication, and the experience of the writer.

- Be paid by the word or by the column inch. Some publications stick to this old-school stringer method of paying by the published length of a story. This does not mean that you are encouraged to write long. Instead, the amount per word and a maximum length of the story is also set in negotiation with the editor.
- Be placed on a retainer to write for a publication. This is like how some attorneys or consultants work for preferred clients. This involves being paid a set minimal amount per week or per month, regardless of the work assigned and completed. The maximum amount is often determined by agreement, either by the hour or by the project. This method is not used as often as the others and is used only when a writer has become a regular contributor.

You may also want to charge for special conditions of an assignment. Dangerous situations, holiday work, overtime hours, rush work, "no-compete" or "exclusivity" clauses that prevent you from writing on the same subject for other publications, and such extraordinary circumstances may call for higher fees beyond the going rates. Also keep in mind that, no matter which of the options are used to pay for your work, your expenses are a separate issue. However, many editors build in ordinary expenses, such as international telephone calls or automobile mileage, into the flat fee paid for the assignment. Additional expenses or extraordinary costs, such as airfare or equipment rentals, must be negotiated.

You are entitled to the money you have earned: it is that simple. Payment should occur within a reasonable period. Yet, some careless editors and publishers do not quite see it that way. They delay or simply do not pay writers in a professional manner. Thus, a first step in establishing a payment arrangement is to determine the normal period for the publication. You can ask about this when an agreement to publish your article has been reached. Then you wait.

It is also important to discuss a guarantee or a "kill" fee before the work is submitted or even written. If an editor changes his or her mind about your story for whatever reasons, you should be compensated for the work you were assigned to put into it. If a completed assignment is not publishable due to no fault of yours, some professional organizations such as the American Society of Journalists and Authors (ASJA) feel, you should be paid a guarantee up to the full amount reflecting the effort put into the story before the decision to "kill" it was made (Bloom et al., 1992). Most professionals agree, also, that you should be paid within one month of delivery. This varies from publication to publication and the cycle within which the publication's business office works. Some process checks only monthly.

ASJA also recommends in its code of ethics and fair practices that "no article payment, or portion thereof, should ever be subject to publication" (Bloom et al., 1992, p. 51). If a publisher does not pay and you feel you are entitled to your fee, writer Dean R. Lambe (1986) suggested several potential actions to take:

- Write a politely worded inquiry letter to the editor
- Next, write the publisher (if different from the editor)
- See a lawyer and have him or her write an inquiry letter
- Take legal action through your lawyer
- If a bankruptcy has occurred, file a claim so you can get a share when assets are sold
- Share your problem with other writers through professional groups and on social media

Keeping Track of Expenses

By now, you realize that freelance writers are paid for two types of expenses. One is the time spent writing and researching the manuscript. The other type involves the cost of getting the story. Besides your time, you encounter certain operating expenses when working on an article. As a freelancer, you must arrange to get these costs paid by the publication that accepts your article or else the cost will come from your agreed fee.

If you have proposed a story, you should estimate expenses and include the estimate in your total fee, especially if the cost is excessive. At worst, expenses can consume your "profits" from the assignment. At best, your employer should reimburse expenses. Typical writer's expenses include automobile mileage, air travel, parking, lodging, food, admission fees, fax costs, express mail or overnight delivery services, long-distance telephone tolls, photo printing or processing, and photocopying. You should expect your publication to pay reasonable expenses, but you should check these details when an assignment is made or when your proposal is accepted.

Overhead costs such as electricity, office space rental, online and Internet connections, local phone, and insurance are rarely covered as specific expenses, also. Professional writers always keep expense logs and receipts, even for costs that are not directly billable to employers. There are two basic reasons for this:

- First, you must have a record if you expect someone else to pay for your expenses.
- Second, if you do not get them reimbursed, you may still claim certain business expenses as deductions on your federal and state income taxes—if they are documented and allowed. Because tax laws change, it is best to check with a tax expert.

Always discuss payment of expenses with your editor in advance, especially if a major expense such as out-of-town travel is involved. The editor set a ceiling for expenses for an assignment, and you are expected to keep within the limit. For example, if you need to make many lengthy long-distance telephone calls or send numerous faxes, an editor may budget funds for that expense. Yet, if you foresee going over the limit, ask about it first. Otherwise, you may find the expenses chipping away your income when the editor refuses, after the fact, to pay them. Tracking expenses for editors or for your income taxes can be easy. It requires a little discipline but is easy to do using financial software such as Quicken or a spreadsheet tool like Excel.

Permissions, Copyright, and Other Matters

You cannot exist in a legal vacuum as a freelance writer. In addition to the general concerns all journalists must have about libel, privacy, copyright, public records, and public meetings, you must also consider legal issues related to freelance writing. This means knowing the details of obtaining use permissions, payment for work particulars, reprint and other second sales rights, contracts, general letters of agreement, and author copyright.

Furthermore, the digital era has brought a new set of concerns. Development of online publications has brought issues involving copyright, among other things. There is increased risk that a writer's work will be used without permission or fees paid if it is online, Boston intellectual rights attorney Howard Zaharoff (1996a, 1996b) observed. Many feature writers do not recognize their rights in the digitally networked world and often do not protect them. Zaharoff said the only way to do this is to know the laws. As a writer, you are concerned with expressing your ideas. Publishers who want to publish your ideas and words, however, are concerned with your rights to them—that is, your copyright. To protect yourself as you sell your words, you must know what copyrights are, how they are created, transferred, and protected, and how such key concepts as "work made for hire" and "fair use" fit into the process (Zaharoff, 1996a, p. 24).

As a writer, you must be concerned with the laws in your state or country involving libel, privacy, fraud, copyright, and access. There are numerous high-caliber discussions of these subjects in other books, and they are not discussed in depth here. *Communication and the Law* by the Communication Law Writers Group and edited by Prof. W. Wat Hopkins (2022), for example, is one of several general treatises of legal issues and concerns affecting all types of feature writers and reporters.

Copyright not only protects you as a writer, it also protects other writers when you use their work. There are times when you will wish to use a substantial passage from another published and copyrighted work. This occurs when quoting other authors, composers, and artists. You must get permission from the source, or rights holder when you want to do this. Generally, there are four steps to getting permission: find the copyright owner, write a permission request letter to the owner, act on the reply to your request letter (for example, pay a fee or provide a copy of the article), and credit the copyright holder in your article. For short, excerpted passages, usually up to 250 words or a paragraph, you do not need formal permission. However, writers are asking for trouble if they fail to get permission for use of longer quotations.

Copyright law in the United States and in other countries is designed to protect creative works by authors. Such law is almost as old as the nation itself, dating back to 1790. A recent modification in the law—and it has been changed many times – focuses protection on the author. As a freelance writer, you need to know who owns your story and other creative work once they are published. This should be stipulated in letters of agreement or contracts. Most such arrangements leave ownership – that is, the copyright – with the author. Thus, unless you give up those rights in writing, ownership of the work remains with you as author, according to U.S. copyright law. But keep in mind that copyright law can vary from nation to nation, so it is always wise to check locally for the rules of the game.

For staff writers producing feature stories in their regular employment role, the work they create belongs to their employers. There can be exceptions to this, but they are rare. Some staff writers, such as extremely popular columnists, negotiate rights to their works when they have become established because they want to publish them elsewhere (e.g., books containing their collected works).

For freelancers, or for full-time staffers doing articles outside of normal work, the work belongs to the author. If there is doubt, discuss it with an attorney or legal expert before you get too deep into your assignment. Whatever is decided about rights should be placed in writing. Under revised copyright law, authors are protected

when the work reaches final form in any tangible medium. This includes not only digital versions of stories, but also photographs, informational graphics, and other creative works of freelance authors. The law protects authors against unauthorized sale and distribution of their work and in this digital era that is important. Although authors do not have to register their work with the U.S. Copyright Office (https://www.copyright.gov) within the Library of Congress (101 Independence Ave. S.E., Washington, DC 20559-6000, 202-707-3000), it is recommended because any legal action that may occur cannot begin until registration is completed. The federal copyright office provides registration, recordation, and information. To register, go online at the office's site at https://www.copyright.gov/registration. Writers can register up to 10 unpublished works on the same application. The process is simple and inexpensive (starting at $45, see https://www.copyright.gov/about/fees.html). Authors are also advised to use a copyright notice symbol ©, the word "Copyright," or the abbreviation "Copr." with the name of the holder and date on all works, although this is not required for protection. Doing so may reduce what is called innocent infringement (Gillmor et al., 1990).

Traditionally, freelance writers have sold only the one-time publication rights of their work. Reprint fees should be assigned to you as author, the American Society of Journalists and Authors suggests to its members (Bloom et al., 1992). The publication that publishes your story should refer inquiries to you, as well, unless you waive these rights. You hold the copyright unless you grant it in writing to the publication. Any other rights are yours, ASJA says, and it strongly urges writers not to sign any documents that transfer those rights to a publisher.

Get the Agreement in Writing

Some freelance writers work regularly with none of the terms of their assignments in writing. It is quite common. Arrangements are casual and any agreements are informal, casually set in e-mail or telephone conversations. If it is done by e-mail, save them. Although this is admirable, it is also potentially troublesome. It is not smart business practice. Perhaps the only occasion when this arrangement between a writer and an editor makes sense is when the relationship is an established one and both parties know the terms and details from repeated experiences. In all other cases, it is wisest to get a memorandum, e-mail, letter, or even a formal contract from the editor that made the assignment. In some situations, such as lengthy or complicated assignments involving international travel or dangerous situations, more formalized contracts may be required to cover all contingencies.

Working with a Contract

Contracts can be beneficial to writers and editors. Many are standardized. If done properly, a contract sets down terms of an agreement between the writer and the editor. Most of the time, the contract is a standard fill-in-the-blank legal form used for all freelancers by a publisher. If you have been offered a contract with a publication, read it thoroughly before you sign it and return it. If you aren't sure after doing so, ask for professional help. A writing or media law professor will often help students, for example. You may find terms that do not apply to your situation, and

these should be deleted. Similarly, there may be peculiar aspects of your situation not covered in the document and they must be edited into it or appended. This can be done without significant delays in most cases. As a writer, you need to look for certain elements of a contract regardless of whether it involves a nonfiction story or something as complex as an entire book (for example, the contract between the author and Routledge, an imprint of Taylor & Francis Group, for this book was 21 pages in length).

The major concerns about these kinds of contracts, said literary agent Lisa Collier Cool (1985b), include publication fee, kill fee (a guarantee if the article is not used), assigned manuscript length (usually in words), payment of expenses (or limitations), payment schedule, manuscript deadlines, payment of advances, author bylines or credits in the publication, serial rights, book publication rights (usually for collected sets of articles by popular and experienced feature writers), dramatic rights, commercial rights, online database retrieval rights, translations (from English to another language), and frequency of use by the publication (some editors will republish a story from time to time).

Editor Glenda Tennant Neff advises any writer looking at a contractual arrangement to consider his or her own writing goals: "As you evaluate a document, consider what you want from your writing. Did you have another sale in mind that selling all rights the first time will negate? Does the agreement here provide the publisher with a number of add-ons (advertising rights, reprint rights, etc.) for which they won't have to pay you again? Contracts are rarely take-it-or-leave-it propositions. Sometimes they are, and the editor will let you know. At that point you will have to decide how important the assignment is to you. But most editors are open to negotiation, and you should learn to compromise on points that don't matter to you while maintaining your stand on things that do." (Neff, 1992, p. 47)

Using Letters of Agreement

Often it is a good idea to work with a letter of agreement instead of a contract. As the writer, you can originate the letter of agreement if the editor does not offer one. This is a suitable compromise to not having a written agreement and the other extreme of a detailed complicated contract. A letter of agreement, like a contract, should state the terms of the relationship between the writer and the publication. Like the contract, it should list fees to be paid and when, who is responsible for expenses, the topic of the assignment, the length of the manuscript, the deadline, the person responsible for visual content, and other relevant details.

Some editors prefer to work with letters of agreement instead of contracts. These letters function as contracts because they have certain details prescribed in them. The terms are placed in writing after discussing the assignment with the freelancer on the telephone. Letters commonly outline the topic, length, due date, fee to be paid if used or if killed, and any rights that the magazine retains. Some publications even specify that similar work cannot be done for competing publications. Editors may also ask writers to agree to certain ethical standards such as not accepting discounts or free goods and services. Agreements often also stipulate that a writer cannot give the assignment to someone else to complete on his or her behalf.

Freelance Writing Ethics

Another important topic for freelancer writers to consider is professional ethics. Ethics are the principles of professional conduct. Although many practices in journalism are legal, some may not be ethical (e.g., taking valuable gifts from sources). There are few, if any, journalistic practices that are ethical, but illegal (e.g., a speeding or parking ticket while working on an assignment). In other words, ethics consider the professional practices that may or may not be accepted behavior among professional writers and editors. For instance, there is much concern today about invasion of individual privacy, independence, publishing the truth, minimizing the harm that may come from our work, and accountability and transparency of our work.

There are numerous codes of professional standards in journalism. Among them are the codes of the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) (https://www.spj.org/pdf/spj-code-of-ethics.pdf) and the American Society of Journalists and Authors (https://www.asja.org/who-we-are/code-of-conduct). These codes can be found online at the organization's Web sites. There are other ethics codes, of course, but they each have a similar purpose: to set forward an acceptable standard to work as a professional journalist. The SPJ code of ethics sets general standards for all journalists and is a good overall model to study. ASJA's code of conduct focuses on harassment and professional responsibility that are the fundamental concerns of writers.

Which professional standards should we be concerned about? Ethics codes list numerous issues pertaining to the relationships of writers to sources, editors, readers, and even other writers. Most general codes, such as the SPJ code, focus on responsibilities to the public, the need for accuracy, the need for freedom of the press, the need for fairness, the elimination of conflicts of interest, and acceptance of gifts in exchange for favors, and the desire to achieve honesty and objectivity.

Setting Up a Workspace

These days, many writers work at home. It was already a common practice for independent and freelance writers when the global COVID-19 pandemic arrived in 2020, and large numbers of publication staff writers began to work at home also. To do this well, writers need a quiet, comfortable, and familiar space. For some, it is a separate room. For others, it is the kitchen table. Some fortunate writers may be able to write anywhere at any time, but just like at home, there is a psychological advantage to being in a particular place reserved just for creativity and writing.

Organizations, Conferences, and Workshops

After your formal education is concluded, the best way to continue developing yourself as a freelance writer is to become involved in professional organizations, attend workshops and conferences about writing, and interact often with other professional writers. Writing groups and special events have numerous benefits that far outweigh any disadvantages such as expenditure of money or time.

Professional Writing Organizations

Professional writer organizations exist at the national, regional, state, and local levels. It should be easy to find one or more of these to meet your needs. Professional organizations offer writers the chance to meet other writers, as well as editors and publishers. These groups, such as the SPJ, may offer special professional development programs and workshops that provide continuing professional education. SPJ's membership includes journalists in all types of roles and levels, including managers.

Other groups focus more on the economic and legal needs of independent writers, not staff writers or editors. Concerns include such matters as fair levels of compensation, health and other insurance benefits, taxation, freedom of expression, uniform standards in contracts, and protection of copyright. Among the best-known writers' organizations are the National Writers Union (https://nwu.org), American Society of Journalists and Authors (https://www.asja.org), and the Authors Guild (https://www.authorsguild.org). Membership in these groups often requires meeting certain qualifications and paying annual dues. Ordinarily, this means you must be established as a writer. The NWU, for example, requires publication of a book, a play, three articles, or other works.

There are also numerous specialized writers' groups at the national level, each reflecting specific interests. Some specialized groups are divisions of larger organizations. Others are more specific in their interests but independent also. Groups that may interest freelance feature writers include the American Medical Writers Association (https://www.amwa.org), the Editorial Freelancers Association (https://www.the-efa.org), the Jazz Journalists Association (https://news.jazzjournalists.org), the Music Critics Association of North America (http://www.mcana.org), the National Association of Science Writers (https://www.nasw.org), the Outdoor Writers Association of America (https://owaa.org), and the Society of American Travel Writers (https://satw.org).

Membership in a professional group might not seem important to you at this time, particularly if you are still in school, but it is increasingly important beyond graduation. These national organizations offer guidance through regular contact with members, officers, and member experts. This comes through publications and local and national meetings. Many beginning writers, especially freelancers, find the contacts made at these organizational meetings helpful for story ideas and opportunities to meet editors and other writers. Local press clubs in major cities such as New York or Washington are also social gathering and meeting places for professional writers.

Most professional memberships are not overly expensive but may seem so to young writers. Most require national dues and may require additional minimal local chapter dues as well. These business expenses may be tax deductible, of course, and are sometimes paid by employers. Regional and local professional organizations are usually less expensive and offer greater interaction among members.

Most of the national professional organizations, in fact, offer regional gatherings and local chapters for more frequent interaction among members. Less formalized writers' clubs and associations are another alternative. These often organize in a community with the goal to further members' careers. These groups can be useful for a freelance writer if the groups offer speakers, writing critique sessions, readings of works, field trips, and professional contact opportunities. Some offer service to the

community, such as helping local schools, as well. Many are organized by towns or neighborhoods. Some have grown as large as statewide groups and have subdivided.

The Independent Writers of Southern California (http://iwosc.org), based in Los Angeles, serves writers and editors from Los Angeles to San Diego. This group provides numerous benefits for self-employed writers such as group insurance, a credit union, membership program meetings, a monthly newsletter, a grievance committee for disputes, and subgroups that represent specific counties in the region. Similar local and regional writing groups to those described above exist around the country. Many have some sort of online presence, whether it be social media group pages or their own Web sites.

On-going Professional Development

Some writers prefer not to join any organizations. Some journalists are just not "joiners." Others work in rural areas where local membership is not possible or where it is not very convenient to be involved in person. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily halted professional gatherings and forced many groups online, numerous writing organizations maintained an active online presence. Today they offer speakers, workshops, discussion groups, and part or entire annual conferences online. So, there are other options for continuing professional education. These come in the form of writers' classes, conferences, seminars, and workshops. Many are at colleges and universities. And public libraries of large cities. There are hundreds of such events scheduled in the United States and around the world.

Such events offer hands-on writing practice and learning, lectures, critiques, opportunities to learn from, and meet established writers, and the chance to learn new techniques. Most events such as these last only a day and are often sponsored by academic programs, foundations, and writers' groups. The chance to interact with other writers during socials and other events may be the best moments—it gives you a chance to exchange ideas, offer critiques, exchange contact information, and help one another in social and working sessions.

Writers should try at least one such conference to see if the experience is beneficial, even with registration fees and other costs involved. A little preparation before attending (e.g., reading about speakers, reading the works of speakers, or reviewing the program) will make the experience more fruitful. Such events afford excellent opportunities to talk to other writers, both beginners and veterans, about their work and about your work. Sessions with speakers are learning situations also, so note-taking and recording are recommended. Usually there is a chance to ask speakers questions during a session or afterward and it is wise to take advantage. Many speakers at these conferences, especially smaller ones, are willing to answer questions and chat with participants afterward. There is also a chance to make contacts for assignments or collaborative efforts, so be prepared.

Publications Aimed at Freelancers

Membership in a freelance writing or other professional organizations normally includes subscriptions to one or more publications. Most common are small print and digital magazines or newsletters issued on a monthly or less frequent basis. Although

they may not be entirely devoted to freelance work, many of the monthly writing-oriented magazines also have regular departments or sections devoted to freelance writing. Publications such as *Writer's Digest* (https://www.writersdigest.com) and *The Writer* (https://www.writermag.com) offer regular doses of professional advice and the latest information about new writing markets.

May Your Fingers Have Wings …

Long-time writer and editor Art Spikol, a regular contributor to *Writer's Digest*, has a distinguished career as an author, magazine editor, and freelancer. Spikol offered this advice to beginning freelance writers:

- Don't talk your stories. If you let it come out of your mouth, chances are it won't come out of your fingertips.
- Develop a sales approach. Not a canned pitch, but an effective demeanor for dealing with editors. That demeanor may end up in a query letter or a phone call or a personal visit, but never lose sight of the goal: to sound responsible and competent. If you want success, you can't be just a writer. The biggest cause of failure among would-be-writers is not wanting to deal with the business issues. For instance, a businessperson doesn't write something first and worry about where to sell it afterwards.
- To be businesslike, ask yourself what kind of magazine you want to sell to. Then what kind of articles does that magazine use? And then make sure that the publication hasn't recently printed an article like yours. And then convince an editor that you're the person to write it. Time is money; don't squander yours.
- You'll have to sound not just like somebody who can write a good article, but somebody an editor wouldn't mind putting on witness stand someday. Because of litigious times, it may come to that.
- If you don't make the sale, don't blame the editor. Editors know what to buy, and they know what their readers want. If you don't sell the article, it (or you) wasn't right for the publication.
- Do your job like a pro. If you were a race car driver, neurosurgeon, or astronaut, a mistake could be disastrous. The same applies to writing: misspell a word, punctuate incorrectly, fail to meet a deadline—and your credibility goes up in smoke. Ultimately, your career will follow it.
- Take charge of your business. If, for instance, you wait 10 weeks to get a yes or no from a publication, it's your fault, not the publication's. Take the idea elsewhere—maybe to two or three other markets. If you were trying to sell your car, would you offer it to one person at a time?
- Don't quit your job. Sure, you want to be a freelancer, but don't give up what you have. It will create too much financial pressure to enable you to succeed. Instead, first see if you have the discipline to spend one hour a day writing. If you can do that on a sustained basis, stretch it to two. See what happens—are you selling? Making contacts? Nothing magical happens when you quit your job—except that your income disappears.
- Don't use best-case scenarios as a guide. Prepare for the worst.

- Diversify. If you want to make a lot more than the above figures, take your writing talent down some more financially rewarding paths. Write newsletters, brochures, annual reports. Write advertising, film scripts, books. They all pay better—for less work—than magazine articles.
- Finally, love writing. Practically everybody I meet would like to be a writer, but not many actually want to write. The hard work is sitting down and putting the words on paper. Now, close this book and do it. May your fingers have wings."

(Personal communication to author, May 10, 1993)

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