

Writing Fabulous Features

WRITING
FABULOUS
FEATURES

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Columbus, Ohio



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Introduction

"Let me live, love, and say it well in good sentences."
Sylvia Plath

Rick Carey failed to break his own backstroke world record in the 1984 Los Angeles Summer Olympics, but he helped make me a feature writer.

I was 16 and a junior in high school. I watched on television as Carey captured his first gold medal in the 200-meter backstroke in spectacular

fashion — and then he pouted. He had not broken his own



Rick Carey at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics.

world record, and it showed in the slump of his shoulders, his hooded eyes and the downturn of his mouth.

It prompted a [media outcry](#).

It made me wonder what exactly he was thinking.

So a few months after the Olympics I called 1-914-555-1212, information for Mount Kisco, N.Y., where Carey lived with his family. The phone number was listed under his father, Jack. I called and asked for Rick, and when he got on the phone I told him I was a high school journalist from California who was hoping for an interview.

He and I talked for 30 minutes, and a career was born.

In the years since that first interview, I have been lucky enough to write far more features on people, places and events, trends and controversies. Each one has been driven by one singular desire: to find the depths of a story and share it with other people.

It's not easy defining a feature. Most people can agree features are articles built from facts that include a level of narrative and information gleaned from talking with human sources. But [Wikipedia](#), for example, defines the feature as "a piece of non-fiction writing about news also known as 'soft news'." The entry cites the Pulitzer Prize criteria that states features are "distinguished by the quality of their writing" and should be memorable for "their reporting, crafting, creativity and economy of expression."

I don't disagree, because defining a feature needs more.

In features, the facts ride in on waves of scenes and true stories called anecdotes to show characters having experiences and living life. Features can go behind the news and unpack it for readers so they can understand more than the who, when and where. They engage with

the how and why of news. They are filled with color and emotion, they show with description rather than tell the facts.

There are many who feel features are fluffy, and they can be when handled without care, where clichés overwhelm crafting and that can often be the struggle for young journalists starting out. For the most part, the people who succeed are the ones who do their research, do solid reporting and care about their writing.

And that is the goal of this book.

Students often struggle with how to break free from the moorings of their previous writing experiences — be it coming from the rigidity of academic writing or the formulaic nature of introductory news writing. The key to features is identifying and recognizing the power of storytelling and what a story can be.

We have gathered in this book advice from some of the best writers we know, with the goal of creating a guide for writers who are new to features. We will walk you through finding ideas, working with sources, writing narratively and anecdotally, and how to marry fiction techniques with nonfiction reporting and writing.

In the words of [Columbus Dispatch](#) special projects reporter [Mike Wagner](#), “The secret is just training your brain to look for great human stories that are going to potentially have an impact or are going to draw people in. My goal with any feature story is to inspire someone or make someone go, ‘Damn, I can’t believe what they went through. I can’t believe they got through that.’”

Meet the Author

Dr. Nicole Kraft spent 25 years as an award-winning reporter, editor and magazine journalist while also working in public relations for professional sports and government communications.



Nicole Kraft

She joined the Ohio State School of Communication in 2010, where she teaches Media Writing and Editing, Sports Media, Feature Writing and Media Law and Ethics. As an associate professor of clinical communication, her research focus includes the academic use of mobile technology among student-athletes, mobile technology use in journalism education and using technology to enhance classroom communication.

Nicole is the director of Ohio State's Sports & Society Initiative and chair of Ohio State's Council on Distance Education, Libraries and Information Technology. She remains an active sportswriter, covering the Columbus

NICOLE KRAFT

Blue Jackets, Ohio State basketball and horse racing for the Associated Press and The Columbus Dispatch.

She is the author of the book, "[Always Get the Name of the Dog](#)," published by Routledge and available through Amazon.

Nicole earned a bachelor's degree in political science from Temple University, a master's degree in communication from Ohio State University and a doctorate in educational leadership from Lamar University.

She was named an Apple Distinguished Educator in 2015.

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Ohio State University, where dreams come true.

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SECTION I

UNCOVERING THE
MAGIC OF
FEATURES

1.

Getting Started

Everyone can write features!

*“Start writing, no matter what. The water
does not flow until the faucet is turned on.”*
Louis L’Amour

“Who can write features?

The short answer is, “Anyone who writes.”

I don’t mean you have to be on the staff of a publication or newspaper to exchange writing for money. Really, all you need is creativity, tenacity and the desire and ability to see stories in every person you meet and each situation you experience.

Sounds simple, right?

I have since 2004 taught feature writing at Ohio State

University — first as an adjunct professor while I was the editor of Hoof Beats magazine, and now as an associate professor of clinical communication.

One reason the class is often full is that students are often seeking real-world journalism experiences. In this class, students come up with story ideas, pitch them to an editor (me), research, report and write them, and then pitch them for publication.

Finding feature success begins with thinking and seeing the world as would a writer.

Let's start with these four tips:

1. **Think like a reader:** Articles are not written for writers, editors or publishers — or professors. They are written for readers. To determine whether an idea is worth writing, think like the reader you wish to serve. What would you find compelling or interesting? What questions would you have that this article could answer?
2. **Be a good reader:** This is perhaps the most important advice for prospective writers and the one that seems the most difficult to fulfill. You have to see writing —good, bad, mediocre — in order to recognize the same traits in yourself. Many young writers skip this step and immediately start trying to put sentences together. Good writing, however, is developed, not inherent. Let others be a guide.
3. **Look for story ideas everywhere:** To find those ideas, you have to train your mind to look for them — in every store, at every party, every day on your way to work, in every experience.

The key to finding features is to understand what gives an idea “feature value,” basically, why people would care enough to read a story about this topic.



Tom Reed

“Finding the right story is 70% of it; the other 30% of it is telling it,” [Tom Reed](#) of The Athletic said. “I think it is coming up with the idea and hopefully one which hasn’t been told or hasn’t been told in the way you want to tell it. Once you find the idea, then everything falls into place.”

He cited an example from 2009 when, as a sports reporter for The Columbus Dispatch, he approached an Ohio State staff member about any interesting stories on the track and field team. The response: Did he know that a shot-put thrower had, four years earlier, inadvertently [killed a judge in a track meet at California?](#)

“It was an older gentleman who was hard of hearing and ... walked across the course and he didn’t know the event was going on,” Reed said. “I ended up getting ahold of both families. It took [the student-athlete] years to get back into it. He felt horrible killing somebody, even though it wasn’t his fault, and he really struggled with that.

“So finding the story, again, I’d say is 70% of the battle.”

In addition to finding the idea, a story has “legs,” “teeth” or both, according to [Mitch Hooper](#) of (614) media group. “Legs” mean the story is functional and can walk on its own — its feature value is clear and evident. Having

“teeth” means it has an interesting angle or relevance as to why it’s being written about now.

“A lot of the times it’s kind of looking for these angles that are unique or interesting, and maybe it hasn’t been tapped into before or has been told yet in this way,” Hooper said. “I think that’s ultimately our job a lot of the times, to be the gatekeeper for what story deserves to be told and what story doesn’t deserve to be told. That can be kind of hard but I think for the most part our job is to find these untold stories, not necessarily rehash something that’s been told over and over again.”

Reading to Be Read

No matter the feature you wish to pursue, every writer must start their quest for publication the same way: *Read*.

While many people believe themselves to be readers, they are actually more superficial observers of words and messages. We need to be consumers, immersed in language and storytelling techniques that help us understand writing good and bad, and to emulate styles to develop our own.

Reading will help you identify:

- What makes writing worth reading?
- What appeals to you?
- In which pieces do you lose yourself? (*For some examples of some such pieces, skip to the [back of this book](#).*)
- In which pieces are you compelled to turn the page and just look at the headlines and pictures?
- Where in a story do you start jumping over paragraphs?
- What sentences help you glide through the story, like driving down a smooth, pristine highway vs.

the jarring, stop-start confusing journey that's like bouncing along a rutted, dirt road?

From this point forward, imitation can become the sincerest form of flattery. When you find writing that you appreciate, see what you can use stylistically in your own writing.

Even more importantly, reading the publication to which you hope to pitch provides you with insights you can get no other way. I have never sold a story to a publication that I have not read — and I mean more than once. It is crucial to get to know the style, format, who writes for it, the readers and what topics they seem to cover.

Transitioning from Reader to Writer

The primary challenge beginning feature writers face is simple: They think of topics and not stories. Students will come in every semester and say they want to write about domestic violence or competitive running. Those are not yet narrowed to ideas.



Misti Crane

“Those are like a Wikipedia entry,” former journalist Misti Crane, assistant director of Ohio State’s research communications, said. “What you want to do is to find some nugget to have a driver of this story. There is research coming out that is shedding light to show how common it is for people who have been abused by their intimate partners to have traumatic brain injuries either from being hit in the head or from being strangled so

they have had oxygen deprivation. All of that makes sense when you hear it, but in the domestic violence world, they really haven’t talked about it until now.”

2.

Finding Ideas

Every person has a story to tell

“Ideas are like rabbits. You get a couple and learn how to handle them, and pretty soon you have a dozen.”
John Steinbeck

Finding feature ideas seems to be the most challenging job for most of my students. Every semester, they come back from their first pursuit of a story and tell me there is nothing to write about.

The truth is everything looks ordinary unless you see it through fresh eyes and think it extraordinary. Story ideas are truly on every corner, in virtually every person you meet, in your own interests and experiences.

So where should you start looking for story ideas?

1. **Listen to what people are talking about.** Keep your ears open at work, parties, the park and the supermarket. Check out social media. The people you know are filled with story ideas.
2. **What interests you or what experiences have you had?** Many publications do not share the same conflict-of-interest issues as a newspaper, so your own life experiences can make good story fodder.
3. **What is happening in the news or in research?** Sexual assaults on college campuses, or the challenges related to student loans are two big national stories that could be tailored to a specific genre of publication — finance, parenting, etc.
4. **Who have you met?** When you meet someone new and ask about what they do, really listen to the answers. You never know when someone might make a great profile.

“Ideas come from every aspect of my life,” Mike Wagner of The Dispatch said. “My personal life, in my job at the paper, reading other newspapers, having conversations with people at fundraisers where my wife works. Going to a football game and seeing people having little ceremonies over the bricks at Ohio Stadium



Mike Wagner

that led to a [4,000-word feature story](#) about what those bricks represent. We wrote those stories about the people behind those bricks. There are like 10,000 of them that people buy around the stadium up there.”

Wagner said he has covered everything from jump-rope competitions to princess parties, to a humanitarian who dedicated his life to helping poor people grow gardens and food on the west side of Columbus, which required a call to his widow two days after his death.

He also has profiled former heavyweight boxing champion Buster Douglas, who now works teaching boxing at Columbus Recreation and Parks, and one-time Ohio State quarterback Art Schlichter, who has been imprisoned multiple times after gambling derailed his life.

Where do those ideas come from?

“I made a list of people that I thought were interesting people in Columbus that we haven’t really done anything in-depth on,” he said. “Sometimes these stories take years to get, sometimes they take days and sometimes they take months. I started writing Art Schlichter in prison when I was a reporter in Dayton. I was actually at the Blue Jackets [NHL] game where a little girl was hit in the head with a puck and eight years later I contacted the family on the anniversary and Espen Knutsen, the guy who struck the puck, and it led to one of the [most powerful feature stories](#) I ever did. Then six months later it led to a reunion between the player and the family. So that was just born out of something that I was involved in personally.”

Sometimes those ideas lead to broader, more impactful stories.

Wagner recalls reading his newspaper a few years ago and seeing a blurb about a guy who jumped from an 11-story building in downtown Columbus. The paper had

never done a piece of substance on suicide, but that incident created the spark of an idea.

“We went back and wrote a narrative story on who he was and how this happened and so on, and that ended up leading years later to a major project on suicides,” he said.

Many times, story ideas will pop into your head fully formed because of an experience you have, a person you meet or a publication you read.

Some examples:

- A new children’s store opens where you live and, while shopping, you learn a percentage of the proceeds go to support pediatric cancer because the owner’s son had leukemia.
- You notice an influx of electric cars in your neighborhood, and you start looking at the prevalence of such cars and how owners may feel about them.
- You start wondering about family vacation spots within a certain geographic distance (let’s say three hours) around certain holiday times (let’s say Christmas).
- You read an article about nationwide statistics on the increase in home-schooling and wonder how many people do it in your area and what challenges they may face.
- Your dog dies.

Believe it or not, when my dog, Cody, died in 2004, I turned it into a publication story because of my own feelings of loss and confusion.



When our dog Cody died, writing a feature helped us cope with the loss.

After he had been euthanized, I honestly did not know what to do next with his body; do I bury him, cremate? Does such a service exist?

After researching the options (and selecting cremation), I figured others might be as lost as I was, so I pitched a story, and it was published under the simple but direct headline, “When Pets Die.”

So you see, story ideas are truly everywhere. The challenge is to extract them from your surroundings, distill them from ideas into solid story themes and find a place that would potentially want to publish them.

One of the hardest realizations of every young writer is that every idea you see or create is not always worth bringing to life. The greatest ideas in the world don’t mean anything if you are not able to execute it or there is not a publication willing to publish it.

“There has to be some kind of captivating, newsy element even in a feature,” Crane said. “I can’t think of a feature that I have read that didn’t have that.”

She recalled a favorite two-day feature series she wrote while a reporter for The Dispatch on a [little girl who had brain cancer](#). She did not pitch her story saying, “I want to write about a kid with brain cancer.” Instead, she saw a new camp opening up for kids who are sick that allowed

them to play and relax and be among other children who don't ask them a million questions about their illness.

"If they go to another camp, they are going to be the sick kid who maybe gets pulled aside for medicine or maybe have a bald head or whatever," she said. "We could have done a feature on the camp and all of its cool facilities or the nice people who are running it, but instead we decided to tell the story of the camp in a way through the story of one of the first campers. So we found this family who was participating in the first round of camping and the story ended up being about her and her family, but it started with this camp.

"It is really important to think about things that are newsworthy with a feature lens. This thing is happening but how could I tell it in a way that involves more storytelling and it maybe will be a richer reader experience than here is the day the thing opens, this is how much it costs, this is how many kids are going a year.

"What is the real meaning of this camp? The real meaning is that mom and dad are going to get a little bit of breathing room. The kid is just going to get to be a kid for a week. This is making our community a better place, so there are themes there."

Some thoughts to consider as you develop a story idea:

I. What is the focus

There is a big difference between a vague topic and an actual, potential story and you have to answer a few questions before you can focus and pitch it to an editor.

"You never just walk into your editor's office or your instructor or your editor and just say, 'I want to do a story on suicide, or I want to do a story on firefighters.'" Wagner

said. “Your proposal should be at most a half a page, but you should be able to sum it up in three or four sentences with what you are wanting to write about, who you are wanting to write about and what impact the story may potentially have, and what makes them interesting.

“If the student can’t summarize that, then maybe it is not worth the time or they need to go back and do more research.”

Some elements to include in that pitch:

1. Who is the audience for which you wish to write?
2. What publication serves that audience?
3. What exactly do you want that reader to know?

Localizing the Story of Barbaro

In 2006, when Kentucky Derby winner Barbaro broke his leg in the Preakness Stakes, his struggle for survival made him a media darling. Standing right alongside him was Dr. Dean Richardson, the surgeon who saved his life, who I had known years earlier when he had performed an emergency procedure on my own horse (who, thankfully, survived).

While nearly every newspaper and countless publications were writing stories on Barbaro and Richardson, I was anxious to find an angle I could pursue, considering my already-established connection with Richardson.

A little research revealed he was a graduate of Ohio State University — and had recently been named a Distinguished Alumnus from the College of Veterinary Medicine. I knew I had my angle.

I immediately contacted the Ohio State Alumni Publication with the “theme” that the most famous vet in America was a Buckeye, and how his experiences at Ohio State had helped get him where he is today.

Even though the editor was interested, she wanted the piece refined even more, so we had to wait a few months until the issue was “resolved” — which unfortunately meant Barbaro’s death.

But that was not the only place the article was published.

Columbus Monthly also contacted me about a piece on Richardson, and the articles actually came out within weeks of each other.

Although the markets were a bit overlapping, the story was big enough to warrant coverage in both — and I was lucky to have the connection to Richardson.



Barbaro

It was the same subject that had been covered by literally hundreds of other writers, but understanding the subject and potential publication markets helped make it a publishable story for me.

2. Do you have the sources?

Just as important is your ability to access the sources you need to complete a story.

We'd all love to interview George Clooney or LeBron James, but access is unlikely.

You not only need to ensure you can reach a subject, but also that the source is willing to speak and has the information you need.

Take the story of a musician who owned a popular coffee roaster/cafe and also was in a band rising up the charts. Our kids had gone to pre-school together and we were good friends. I pitched the story, sure I had access, and was thrilled to call and tell him a publication was interested.

His response: "I'm not interested."

He simply did not want the publicity for himself if it did not include his band.

3. Are you the right author?

Your class on international terrorism might have been fascinating, and you might be an avid reader of Time magazine, but that does not make you an expert on Hamas' impact on the West Bank or whether the Syrian conflict can be resolved through diplomacy.

To write on those topics requires significant understanding and respect in the field. If you have it, pursue those stories. If you don't, let's aim for the areas where our skill and experience do stand out. Let's consider:

- Your neighbor turns her front yard into a vegetable patch. It could be a profile on her or a story on urban farming.
- Your dog is allergic to chicken. What other allergies do pet owners cope with and how?
- You read a newspaper story about a guy who had cancer and wrote a children's book about it. The news might be the publication of the book. You could profile him to get the story behind the story.

Sometimes the feature value might appear evident but is not as fully fleshed out as it needs to be. [Alison Lukan](#) of The Athletic uses her professional colleagues to determine whether a story idea has potential, and advocates students doing the same.



Alison Lukan

“I can say, ‘Hey, I am thinking of working on a story about this. What do you think?’” Lukan said. “Sometimes, honestly, there is a joke among us, because I had an idea for a story and one of my colleagues said it was

not good enough for a story, and it turned into one of our more popular stories. So sometimes don't just blindly follow what people say."

Publication or Article First?

Thankfully for us, publications need articles and someone to write them. The key is to pitch the right idea to the right publication and help them see why you are the ideal person to be the writer.

Pitches often come from two different trains of thought:

1. I have a great idea, so I will seek a publication that will publish it, or;
2. This publication is terrific and I want to write for it, so I will develop a story idea for it.

It really does not matter which one motivates you toward a story pitch. What is crucial is that the story idea you develop and the publication you pitch are a perfect marriage.

We have already discussed the need to read, but almost as important is to develop expertise in the story idea before you ever report or write a word.

You might think you know what your story is about, but can you do what is known as the "elevator pitch," where you thoroughly explain it to someone in the 20 seconds it takes to ride up or down in an elevator?

What exactly do you want readers to know when they read your article? Is it original enough so that it has not been done before? Is it narrow enough to appeal to a specific audience? Have you identified the sources you will need and, just as importantly, are they accessible to you in the time frame you need?

"I try to have a decent idea as far as what my audience

cares about, what my audience is interested in,” said [Adam Jardy](#) of The Dispatch. “A lot of times that will sort of steer me in one direction or another. But at the end of the day if you’re writing something that’s going to have a lot of heft to it, it’s got to be something that anybody would find interesting, something that you know you don’t just have to be a sports fan to appreciate, you don’t have to just be interested in that specific topic. You want to find something that speaks to a wide section of the population.

“It has to have enough of a hook to it, it has to have enough interest that they’re going to want to sit down and read the whole thing. You have got to identify that before you really start diving in and putting in all the time. If you don’t find it interesting your readers aren’t going to find it interesting, and then you’ve just wasted your time so you have to make sure you find it interesting and that you know that your readers will.”

So-What Factor

Every time a reader begins a story, he or she almost immediately begins to ask, “So what? What is in this for me?” That means writers have to anticipate that question and show the reader from the very first sentence why they should keep reading. In journalism terms, we call this the “so-what factor,” and we have to make sure every article contains it.

3.

Finding Your Focus

*Presenting facts and information with a
human spin*

*It's literally true that every person asked
the right questions has an interesting story
to tell. Don't narrow the possibility of what a
story can be.*
Steve Rushin

It can't be easy to be a journalism student.

For four years in high school, you were taught to write essays containing a thesis statement, utilizing parenthetical citations to attribute material.

Hard news articles have their place. They are written so readers can get the information they need immediately and stop reading at any time, and still come away with the whole story. This is different from a feature, sometimes described as “soft news,” which is written to encourage the audience to stick around to the end, so that the climax comes at the end.

Becoming Familiar with Features

There are a lot of terms for what we are seeking to produce: piece, feature, article, story, narrative. But ultimately the form for all is the same: nonfiction written in journalistic form utilizing:

- Research
- Interviews
- Facts
- Quotes

News writing utilizes all of these pieces, but that is not what we are crafting.

We are creating feature articles

What is feature writing?

Feature writing is relating facts and information with a more narrative style, using fiction-writing techniques, including characters, descriptions, anecdotes, scene-setting and dialogue.

This version of nonfiction goes beyond simple news transmission. Readers of these types of works want to be smarter than when they started reading; they want to be taught, entertained, captivated and involved.

To that end, some think about feature articles as more “fluff,” lacking the hard-hitting impact of the news. Truthfully, we are really presenting facts and information

with more of a human spin, using people to bring us into and move us through the stories.

And that means we can throw out the stiffness of news writing and start to look at a variety of styles and voices within the feature model.

“Newsworthiness” also changes to “feature worthiness,” which takes away burdens related to timeliness. We are no longer wedded to reporting on what is happening now. Instead, a feature can be valid simply because it’s something readers have yet to learn about. It can be crafted from a topic of interest. It can single out a specific person, place or entity to expose it to the public.



Abby Vesoulis

“I try to identify the staying power of a story,” Abby Vesoulis of Time magazine said. “If something is going to blow over in a news cycle in an hour or a day or two then obviously you don’t want to invest the days or weeks it takes to report a feature story. But if this is something that is kind of ever-relevant or

something that will continue to come up again then it’s smart to be like one of the first people to have really gotten familiar with the topic and really find out what the foundations of the issue are before other people start covering it.”

The emphasis is on the people involved, as opposed to the action taking place, providing us with the narrative

framework from which we can feel and share the experience with them.

Thinking this way, “feature” becomes an umbrella term for various story structures that most of us like reading, including:

- Personality profiles
- Human interest
- Interviews
- Trend
- Expose
- Personal experience
- How-tos
- Travel
- Seasonal

This type of writing, more so than news, combines elements of nonfiction (truth) with fiction (style), like plot, symbolism, character development and dialogue.

The secret, said Mitch Hooper of 18970 Magazine, is, “How can I figure out how to tell that story that hasn’t been told already.”

Readers: It’s all about me

There is only one thing readers think when they pick up a magazine, leaf through the pages and begin to read an article: “What’s in this for me?”

That means focusing a topic comes down to two questions, said [Steve Rushin](#) of Sports Illustrated:

- Who is your reader?
- What does he or she want to know?

“The hardest part of writing a column or longer features by far is coming up with ideas,” Rushin said. “If a student

says, ‘I’m going to write about LeBron James,’ that is not really an idea. The trick and art are going and finding something different to write about that guy who has been written about so much.”

Rushin said even an idea that might seem flimsy or silly can work. He once wrote a 10 -page feature on finding the northern-most golf course in the world and did another story on the [demise of physical tickets](#) and what was the effect on people who collect ticket stubs.

“I was fascinated that on the website devoted to tickets, the biggest traffic was when someone posted tickets to a Yanni concert,” Rushin recalled. “One quote was how they blew the server the day; Yanni fans crashed it. Whatever amuses you will amuse the reader, and the unexpected is usually the best angle.

“You have to find the universe...You have to find the big worlds in these small ideas and make them epic.”

Readers don’t have much time in their lives for something that does not benefit them in some way — so that means you need to think about them at every stage of article creation:

1. **Idea:** What is this story about and how will it serve the reader?
2. **Information gathering:** What do I want the reader to know, and who can help me tell them?
3. **Organizing:** In what order do the readers need to know the story so they are entertained, informed and compelled to keep reading?
4. **Writing:** Which part of all this material I have gathered will the reader want and need to know?

If you can think of and like the reader through every stage

of your writing process — from conception to execution to pitch — you will be well on your way to feature success.

4.

Types of Features

From profiles to travel stories, there is feature style for everyone

“If my doctor told me I had only six minutes to live, I wouldn’t brood. I’d type a little faster.”

Isaac Asimov

Truth be told, no one writes a plain, old feature article, since “feature” is an umbrella term that encompasses a broad range of article types, from profiles to how-tos and beyond.

The goal here is not just to know these types exist but rather to use them to shape your material into a format that best serves your reader and the publication for which

you are writing. Pitching a story that takes a particular format or angle also helps editors see the focus and appeal of your idea more clearly, which can help you get hired.

Let's take a look at some of the most common feature article types.

Profiles

A profile is a mini-biography on a single entity — person, place, event, thing — but it revolves around a nut graph that includes something newsworthy happening now. That “hook,” as we call the news focus, must be evident throughout the story.

A profile on Jennifer Lawrence might be interesting, but it is most likely to be published about the time she has a new movie coming out or she wins an award.

This fulfills the readers' desire to know why they are reading about someone at a given time or in a given magazine.

The best profiles examine characters and document struggles and dreams. It's important that you show a complete picture of who or what is being profiled — warts and all — especially since the controversy is often what keeps people reading. Controversy, however, is not the only compelling aspect of profiles. They are, most importantly, personal and insightful, beyond the pedantic list of accomplishments you can get from a bio sheet or a PR campaign.

Profiles aim to:

- Reveal feelings
- Expose attitudes
- Capture habits and mannerisms.
- Entertain and inform.

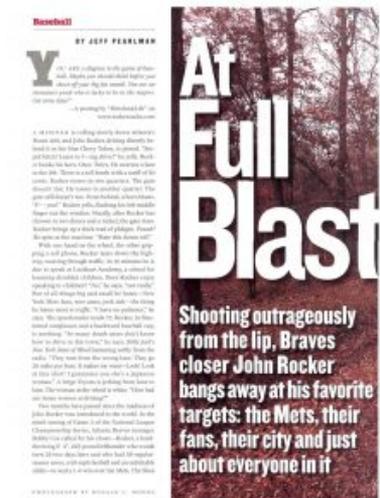
Accomplishing those goals is what makes profiles challenging to write, but also makes them among the most compelling and fulfilling stories to create.

Delving deeply into your subject's interests, career, education and family can bring out amazing anecdotes, as can reporting in an immersive style.

The goal is to watch your subject closely and document his or her habits, mannerisms, vocal tones, dress, interactions and word choice. Describing these elements for readers can contribute to a fuller and more accurate presentation of the interview subject.

Consider this opening paragraph from one of my favorite profiles, [Jeff Pearlman's look](#) at one-time baseball bad boy John Rucker of the Atlanta Braves:

A MINIVAN is rolling slowly down Atlanta's Route 400, and John Rucker, driving directly behind it in his blue Chevy Tahoe, is pissed. "Stupid bitch! Learn to f—ing drive!" he yells. Rucker honks his horn. Once. Twice. He swerves a lane to the left. There is a toll booth



Jeff Pearlman's story on John Rucker in Sports Illustrated.

with a tariff of 50 cents. Rucker tosses in two quarters. The gate doesn't rise. He tosses in another quarter. The gate still doesn't rise. From behind, a horn blasts. "F— you!" Rucker yells, flashing his left middle finger out the window. Finally, after Rucker has thrown in two dimes and a nickel, the gate rises.

Rocker brings up a thick wad of phlegm. Puuuh! He spits at the machine. "Hate this damn toll."

Perlman does not have to tell us anything about Rocker; he has shown us and lets us make our own determinations as to the person we are getting to know through this article.

Research is key to any piece, but profiles provide the ultimate test of your interviewing skills. How well can you coax complete strangers into sharing details of their private lives? Your job is to get subjects to open up and share their true personalities, memories, experiences, opinions, feelings and reflections.

This comes from a true conversational style and a willingness to probe as deep as you need to get the material you need.

Interview your subject and as many people as you need to get clear perspectives of your profile subject.

Not everyone will make your article, but you can get background information and anecdotes that could be crucial to understanding your subject or asking key questions. (Now might be a good time to download "Always Get the Name of the Dog.")

Take the time to watch your subject at work or play so you can really get to know them in a three-dimensional way.

The fewer sources and the less time you spend with your subject the less accurate or complex your profile will be.

The framework of a profile follows these guidelines:

Anecdotal lede

An engaging, revealing a little story to lure us into your article.

Nut graph/Theme

A paragraph that shows the reader what exactly this story is about and why does this entity matter now?

Scene 1

Observe our subject in action now using dialogue details and descriptions.

Chronology

A recap of our subject's past activities using facts, quotes and anecdotes as they relate to the theme.

Where Are We Now?

What is our subject doing now, as it relates to the theme?

What Lies Ahead?

Plans, dreams, goals and barriers to overcome.

Closing Quote

Bring the article home in a way that makes the reader feel the story is complete like they can sigh at the end of a good tale.

Q&A

A [Q&A article](#) is just what it sounds like — an article structured in questions and answers.

Freelancers and editors both like them for several reasons:

1. They're easy to write.
2. They're easy to read.
3. They can be used on a variety of subjects.

The catch is writers/interviewers must take even greater care with the questions asked and ensuring the quality of the answers received because they will provide both the skeleton and the meat of your piece.

This may seem obvious, but quality questions are vital, meaning we avoid closed-ended (yes or no, single-word

answer) questions and instead ask questions that will inspire some thought, creativity and explanation or description.

Q&A articles start with an introduction into the subject — often as anecdotal as any other piece, but then transition into the fly-on-the-wall feeling of watching an interview take place. You are the interviewer.

The subject is the interviewee, and the reader is sitting alongside you both soaking in the experience and your relationship.

That means a Q&A has to stay conversational so it does not feel like a written interrogation.

The interview itself is much like we would use for an article, but you have to be more conscious of the order in which you ask questions, how they transition from one another and the quality of the answer so you are not tempted to move answers around.

You will be amazed at how many words get generated in an actual conversation or interview, so the Q&A is far from over when the interview concludes. Editing and cutting the interview transcript can take far longer than the interview itself.

You cannot change your subject's words, but you take out redundancies and those verbal lubricants that keep conversations moving — “like,” “you know,” etc.,. Sentences and phrases can be edited out by using ellipses (...) to show you have removed something.

Grammar is a challenge with a lot of transcripts, and I will leave in that which represents the subject, but I will not let them come across badly by misusing words or phrases.

Instead, let's take it out or ask them to clarify.

Round-up

If you do an internet search on “round-up story,” you very often get a collection of information from various places on a central theme.

Feature round-ups are written the same way.

These articles are like list blog posts, where you have a variety of suggestions from different sources that advance a common idea:

- 7 secrets to a happy baby
- 10 best vacation spots with a teenager
- [5 tips on how to pick the perfect roommate](#)

You may notice that there is a numeric value on each of these ideas, and that is a key part of the roundup. You are offering a collection of suggestions, provided and supported by sources, on a specific topic.

The article begins, as most features do, with an anecdote that takes us to a theme, but instead of a uniform or chronological body style, we break it up into these sections outlined by each numbered suggestion.

Each section can be constructed like its own mini feature — complete with sources, facts, anecdote and quotes, or just the advice provided by a qualified source (not the author!).

There does not need to be a specific order to how each piece of the article is presented, rather their order is interchangeable.

It is important to have sources with some level of expertise and not merely opinions on the topic. Just because someone went to Club Med with their 5-year-old and had fun does not mean it’s the best vacation spot for kids.

We first need an idea of what makes a good vacation

spot and then support with facts how this one fits the criteria.

How-To

Readers love to learn how to do new things, and there are few better ways to teach them than through how-to articles.

How-to articles provide a description of how something can be accomplished using information and advice, giving step-by-step directions, supplies and suggestions for success.

Unlike round-ups, these articles must be written sequentially and have to end with some sort of success.

Aim for something that most people don't know how to do, or something that offers a new way of approaching a familiar task. Most importantly, make sure it is neither too simplistic, nor too complex for their attempt, and include provide definitions and anecdotes that show how things can go well or poorly in attempting this task.

Personal Experience

Most of us have had some experience that we think, "I would love to write about this so other people can learn or enjoy this with me."

If you have a truly original and teachable moment and can find the right feature to which to pitch it, you may very well have a personal experience story on your hands.

Some guidelines for finding such a story include whether this is an experience readers would:

- Wish to share?
- Learn or benefit from?
- Wish to avoid?
- Help cope with a challenge?

Unlike a first-person lede, which might use your personal anecdote to get us into a broader story, in a personal experience article you are the story, and how we learn from your experience will help us navigate the same waters.

They can be emotional, like the New Yorker piece on women who share their [abortion stories](#), but they can also be about amazing vacations that others might consider — “Bar Mitzvah trip to Israel” anyone? — or how about a man who quits a high-powered job to stay home with his kids?

No matter what your experience, you must be willing to tell your story with passion and objectivity, sharing the good, the bad and the uncomfortable, and making readers part of the experience.

It’s important that the experience is over before you pitch, so the reader can get a clear perspective of what happened and the resolution. Did it work or not?

As the author, you also need time to gain perspective on your issue so you can “report” it as objectively as possible.

Finally, make sure you are chronicling something attainable or achievable. We need to go through it and come out the other side with evidence that will make us smarter and better equipped to handle a similar situation that might come our way.

The Art of Covering Horse Racing

[Melissa Hoppert](#) is the racing writer from the New York Times, and despite covering the same events over and over she manages to find a unique story each time.

Belmont Park is called [“Big Sandy,”](#) because the track has so

much sand on it. I rode the tractor and asked the trackman, “What makes it like that? What it’s like to race on it?”

It was my most-read story that year. You have to think outside the box.

When the horse Justify came along, it was like “here we go again — another Triple Crown with the same trainer. What can I possibly write about Bob Baffert that has not written before?”

We observed and thought outside the box. We didn’t do a Bob Baffert feature. We went to the barn and still talked to him every day, but we looked at things differently.

We [focused more on the owners](#). They were in a partnership and that is a trend of the sport. Rich owners team up to share the risk. That made it more of a trend story. Is this where we are going.

Sometimes I like writing about the horse. American Pharoah was a really fun, quirky horse. My most favorite story was when I went to visit American Pharoah’s sire, [Pioneer of the Nile](#), at the breeding shed. He has a weird breeding style. He needed the mood to be set. It was kind of random, but it helped tell a story of American Pharoah that had not yet been told.



Justify

True-Life Drama

Examples of these include:

- [The couple on a sight-seeing plane ride that had to land the plane when their pilot died](#)
- Aron Ralston frees himself by [sawing off his own arm](#) after getting trapped in the desert.
- [Tornado survival stories](#)

It is fitting that the first example I found to show you of true-life dramas came from Readers Digest because these types of stories are the bread and butter of that magazine.

They are the stories that are almost impossible to believe but are true, and they are driven by the characters who make them come to life.

Some “true-life dramas” become even more famous when they are adapted for the screen, like the [Slate story of being rescued from Iran](#), you might know better as the film, “Argo.”

How about Capt. Richard Phillips’ [dramatic struggle](#) with Somali pirates, now a film starring Tom Hanks?

Steve Lopes of the Los Angeles Times found a [violin-playing homeless man](#) who became the subject of numerous columns and later the movie “The Soloist.”

These stories are, quite simply, dramatic experiences from real people, where they live through moments few of us can imagine.

Many of the feature versions of these stories start as newspaper coverage of the breaking event, and then a desire to go behind-the-scenes and chronicle exactly what happened over a much longer course of time — the lead-up, the culmination and the aftermath.

Being a consumer of news will help you come across these stories, and a desire to conduct really penetrating

interviews to get the “real story” will make them come to life.

Seasonal

You might not be thinking about Christmas in May or back-to-school in February, but chances are editors will be scheduling those topics and looking for article ideas.

Seasonal stories are the ones that happen every year and need a fresh angle on an annual basis.

It goes beyond standbys like “Best side dishes for Thanksgiving,” and how to make a good Easter basket, to “[How to do the holidays in a newly divorced family](#),” and “Back to school shopping for a home-schooled child.”

The key is that a timely observance is interwoven in the theme, and these stories are planned and often executed months in advance since we all know they are coming.

Seasonal can also relate to anniversaries — Sept. 11, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Titanic sinking — and their marketability can escalate dramatically around an anniversary.

The angle is all about the audience, so think how you can spin one day or a milestone event to toddlers, teens, seniors, your local community, pets, business, food, travel and you may suddenly have 10 stories from one topic.

Remember, though, that your pitch has to come long before the event is even in the mind of most readers — at least six months and sometimes a year.

Travel

The perceived glamour division of freelance writing is the travel piece, which most people think comes with an all-expense-paid trip to swanky, exotic locations.

That can be true, but more likely writers make their own plans and accommodations and their pay reflects that a

portion of their compensation comes from the good time they had traveling.

The good news is that with the rise of travel blogs and smaller travel publications there are more outlets than ever to pitch your ideas, provided they are original and unique to the audience.

That means, “Traveling to Paris,” probably won’t work, but “[Traveling to Paris on \\$50 a day](#)” just might.

That also does not mean that publications are looking for your personal essay on what you did for your summer vacation, or just because you visited Peru and loved it that it’s worthy of a feature article. You have to show the editor and the reader why you have a unique perspective and angle on a traveling experience.

Travel writing means looking for stories on about:

1. How to travel
2. When to travel
3. Advice on traveling

The more specifically you can focus on a population of travelers — seniors, parents, honeymooners, first-time family vacation — the more likely you can come up with an idea that has not been overdone and pitch it to a niche magazine.

In a column on the Writer’s Digest website, [Brian Klems](#) writes the need to travel “deeply” as opposed to just widely, and I thought that was such an insightful term. He spelled out the need to really dig deep into whatever area you might cover and take copious, detailed notes, but I would add that you also have to really dig deep into what people want to know about travel and enough to go past the cliché or stereotypes.

The more descriptively you can present experiences, the more compelled readers may be to join you.

To separate yourself from the cacophony of travel voices out there, consider building up expertise in one subject or area. If you are from an interesting area, see how you can pitch stories to bring make outsiders insiders. Are you a big hockey fan? What about traveling to different hockey venues and making a weekend travel story out of what to see and do before and after the game?

The key to success is to become a [curious and perceptive traveler](#) from the minute you book a trip. Think about how your experience can be a travel story, as opposed to only looking to pitch stories that could become an experience.

Some other types to consider:

[Essay or Opinion](#)

First-person pieces, which usually revolve around an important or timely subject (if they're to be published in a newspaper or "serious" magazine).

[Historical Article](#)

Focus on a single historical aspect of the subject but make a current connection.

[Trend Story](#)

Takes the pulse of a population right now, often in technology, fashion, arts and health.

[Evergreen](#)

No, we are not talking about trees.

Evergreen stories are ones that do not have an expiration date and can be pitched for creation at any time.

A profile on a new trend or profile-worthy person has to be pitched in relatively short order, or it will not really marketable anymore. But a story on how to build an

NICOLE KRAFT

exercise program around your pet does not really have to be published at a specific time.

Incorporating evergreen ideas into your repertoire of story ideas will open up even more publishing doors.

5.

Research

'Before you write a word, it's important that you researched your subject to death'

Everybody walks past a thousand story ideas every day. The good writers are the ones who see five or six of them. Most people don't see any.

Orson Scott

How do you know if a story is worth pursuing? How do you find out if sources are qualified? How do you know what angle is the best to pursue among the various options that might be available?

Research.

“You are trying to get people to relate to the subject — to make an impact on others with their story,” [Lucas](#)

[Sullivan](#) said. “Before you write a word, it’s important that you researched your subject to death and you have spent a considerable amount of time talking with the people or person you are writing about.”

What research looks like will vary depending on the subject of your story. There are the obvious sources, such as newspaper and magazine clippings, but consider also court files, government data sets, trending Twitter topics. At the minimum, research provides names, family members and other starting points for interviews. At best, it provides authoritative detail that can set a story apart.

For a profile article, research will involve finding out as much background information on your subject as you can — from websites, previous articles, LinkedIn, a curriculum vitae, even interviewing other people on your subject. On a complex issue related story, there may be public record requests.

The amount of research depends on who you are writing for, [Michael Farber](#) of [Sports Illustrated](#), said.

“Extra reporting is not a luxury we had in newspapers,” he said. “You use most of what you reported. You hone in on the stuff you needed. You use 50 percent or more. But the rule of thumb at magazines is if you use more than 10 percent of your reporting, you haven’t reported enough. You throw out 90 percent and choose the best 10 percent. It took me a while to get used to that.”



Zack Meisel

[Zack Meisel](#) of [The Athletic](#) said research is critical for two main reasons:

1. The more writers know going in, the less time is wasted. “I don’t need to ask all these simple background questions because I’ve read about it and I know it. You want to double-check things, but you don’t have to waste all that time.”
2. Good research lets the writer know enough to encourage sources to open up. “They can tell you’ve done your homework and they appreciate that. They don’t feel like they’re talking to a stranger, they feel like they’re talking to someone who at least knows a little bit about their story.”

“I think [research] is the most important thing that I think a lot of writers don’t consider,” Meisel said. “It is maybe the most underrated aspect of feature writing.”

Mitch Hooper of (614) Columbus said his research often involves searching social media like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, along with LinkedIn and Wikipedia. He also will look to see if a subject has been interviewed before for another story.

“If I’m going to sit down and talk to someone I don’t want to ask them questions, I can Google on my own,” he said. “There’s never too much you can do. Taking that extra step not only shows that you care about the story,

but it also excites your source where they're like 'holy crap this guy didn't just Google me real quick and find the first three things about me.' You want them to feel comfortable talking to you and know that you care about that story because they almost have more invested in it than you do at the end of the day."

Knowing the background of a person or subject helps writers know what makes them tick before they even begin the story, and that can help uncover angles that will make the story far more compelling to readers.

Melissa Hoppert of the New York Times cited the example of the 2017 Triple Crown winner Justify. While many horse owners are in the business to find their dream horse who will make their racing fantasies come true, the owners of Justify had different motivations: making money.

"They ran their farm like a business," she said. "That's different from a lot of owners. And that impacted how they were experiencing the Triple Crown. That's compared with a horse like California Chrome. He was his owner's first horse. They had a lot of emotion. Doing your homework shows why they would experience it differently."

Sometimes the most significant research, however, is to pay attention to the answers being provided and try and incorporate what you know with what you are finding out.

That's why Adam Jardy of the Columbus Dispatch, who does as much research as he can before working on a story, is not afraid to "look like an idiot" in the course of the interview.

"I'm asking this person about their life, I'm asking about their story, so I'm going to do as much research as I can, but I don't know everything about them," Jardy said. "You

can come prepared to the point where you think you might know this person or you might think you understand all of the details and they're sitting there going 'this person doesn't know me, this person has no idea.'

"You are the person that this thing happened to. You are the person this story is about. Why don't you tell the story? I've probably read 15 other things about you that other people have written but I'm not just writing the same things those people wrote. Those people are informing my questions to you but you are the person who knows the story so please tell me the story."

"I would rather every day of the week look stupid and ask a stupid question but then have the information right in my story than the other way around. If I just assume, 'OK I don't need to ask this and I'll look silly if I do,' then your writing might end up being incorrect. So you can't be afraid to ask a question that's going to make you look stupid or that might make the person think you're stupid as long as you're getting information that you need."

Abby Vesoulis of Time magazine said the amount of research often depends on the type of article she is doing. Talking to a mayor, she will do a couple of days of research but she won't reach out to a senator to schedule an interview with them until she understands everything they were doing, including the proposed bill and their background.

"I was interviewing Sen. Joni Ernst, a Republican from Iowa, who has one very firm opinion on how to make [paid family leave a reality](#)," Vesoulis recalls. "Then I was interviewing Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, a Democrat from New York, who has a very different idea of how to get it passed. I know that the two are very good friends and like go on vacations together, so those are the kinds of things

you want to know when you into the room so you can say ‘I know that you two are friends, what do you think about her idea?’”

Stories are not boring. Writers are.

Not all stories are sexy or involve celebrity interviews or scandal. Some stories may, on the first assignment, appear flat-out boring:

- New sewer lines being put down on your beat — yeah!
- Cat rescue has too many cats — bummer!
- A furniture store celebrates its 50th anniversary — yippee!

It is not, however, the story that is boring — it’s your attitude or approach.

Start every assignment by thinking what a reader would find interesting, and then, if you must, force yourself to feign interest in that story. That means every interview with a source should appear to be fascinating to you — even though you and I both know it may not be.

Get up close and personal with those sewer lines, literally in the trenches as they are being installed, and write about what you see and hear — and smell.

Visit the rescue and just watch and listen. What do too many cats sound and feel like? Write it down and show us in words.

The 50th anniversary in that store means someone — or likely some family or partnership — devoted half a century to a single business in a community that has likely come to count on it in some way. What was the neighborhood like 50 years ago? How does someone stay engaged in the same business for 50 years?

The sources you are interviewing care about their subject, and just like kids and dogs know when you don't like them, sources know when you don't care about their subject.

One of the best parts of being a reporter is getting to meet people you didn't know who can talk on subjects you may have never considered. Give yourself the opportunity to incorporate the story into your own psyche, at least for the time you are writing it.

“Sometimes people you know pretty well don't want to go there, and sometimes people you don't know at all will just lay it all out there,” Tom Reed of *The Athletic* said. “That happened to me this year when I was in Switzerland doing a story on a Blue Jackets prospect, [Elvis Merzlikins](#). He was like an open book. He's like, ‘Here are all the things I did as a kid and some of it was pretty crazy.’ Again, there are people I have known for years in the hockey world that I know would not go to where Elvis went, who I had never met in my life an hour ago.”

**Learning not to waste time with Abby
Vesoulis of *Time* magazine**

I just finished a story on paid family leave that I worked on for a long time. One component of that was understanding how important the issue was to the White House. Everybody in the White House is obviously very busy, so I approached them when I was way further along in the reporting process than I approached people who are advocates of the issue.

With the advocates of passing legislation, they would've talked to me for five hours because they were excited that this

is something that my publication was going to work on. I went to coffee with them, and I said, “OK talk to me like I’m 10 and I don’t understand any of this.” Tell me the history of the problem in your perspective, tell me the people you think I should talk to, tell me why you think this is important now.

Obviously everything they say you have to take with a grain of salt because they are biased and they think this is the most important issue ever.

That kind of gives you an overall, 20,000-foot look, but then you go and approach the people they mentioned. They were talking about Republican senators, so I reached out after I did the research of what these Republican senators were doing. I told their press people what I was doing, and I went in and had 20-minute interviews with a senator or representative because their time is valuable.

As you go further along in the process, you build up the trust of these people, and then you can ping them again over email for follow-up questions. They’re more willing to give you a couple of little pieces of background information. You just have to be aware of what other people’s time constrictions are and approach the people who are your like “have to get” when you have a firm grasp on the topic so you’re not wasting their time.

6.

Spotlight On: Todd Jones

'Being open to any possibilities and willing to follow those paths is the key'

As a sportswriter, [Todd Jones](#) covered everything from the Super Bowl to the 2000 Sydney Olympics. As a news reporter, he covered homelessness from the street level. Now a writer for the Ohio State Alumni Magazine, he digs deep on features that help bring people come to life for readers.

[Jake Rahe](#) sat down with Jones to get his secrets on feature writing.

How do you go about finding something that's feature worthy and then also how do you go about pitching that?

With the alumni magazine, I am always scouring different news items for things that catch my eye. We do personality profiles of people so we are looking for alums that represent different colleges of different ages.



Todd Jones

I might see a news nugget and just throw it in a file. I call it a “toy box.” It’s funny, because right now we’re looking for a younger alum. We want a woman who’s from out of Ohio. So that’s kind of like a directive like hey let’s see if we can find somebody interesting along those lines.

I’m always looking at anything that catches my eye even on public bulletin boards and online different things, Twitter.

Once a person catches my eye then I’ll just do a deep dive into researching that person, finding any past articles or anything I can find information about them. Then I try to do a one-pager with highlights on why I think this person fits what we’re trying to do with our particular story. Then I talk to my editors about it, have them read that, and then have a full-blown discussion about it and go from there.

How do you go about finding those sources and getting them comfortable?

I make it known upfront that I’m going to need a lot of

your time if you're willing to participate. I'll usually have a meeting with them at the start and lay out what I'm going to try to do, what I envision, what I'm going to try to do with the story, what kind of access I need.

I want to try to be in places that shed light on who they are. It's the old idea of showing something, not telling.

The initial conversation is not so much of an interview but a getting to know each other a little bit in a conversational way. Then you can usually determine pretty quickly whether or not they're going to be willing to give you enough time.

I did a feature on [Pete Edwards](#), an alum, a doctor who helped save the Columbus Crew and his family became part owners of the Crew. He's a doctor, so I went one day to his work, and that was one of the scenes in the story. Another scene was on the morning of the first game of the season, the fans joined at dawn to toast the start of a new year, and he joined them. He told me he was going to join them, and I said, "I will go with you."

That scene showed me how he interacted with people. And it was much better to depict that than it was to have somebody just tell you, "Oh he's a great guy, blah blah blah."

Do you write out the structure of your story in your head before you go about writing?

I think about what's been written about them, how it been written, what hasn't been written about him, what strikes me as a small anecdote that might be better to explore a little bit.

I do a lot of thinking along what am I trying to accomplish with this story. What do I think it's going to be about? Not that it is what it ends up being about, but sometimes just thinking about what you're trying to do

beforehand. It makes the outlining and writing process easier because you're kind of working on it as you go.

Do you think of it like scenes?

I try to write scenes. If it's a longer piece, I'll try to write in three parts. If I get 3,000 words, I'll try to or I'll try to write three 1,000-word sections or maybe an 800 and 1,200 and 800.

When I do that, I try to write three different little stories and each one has a lead. The finish of the first scene leads you into the second scene.

When I was younger and I would try to write 3,000, I would just start my first sentence and start rambling. The next thing I know, I've got 2,500 words but where am I going? Breaking things in chunks is easier for the reader, but it's also easier to conceptualize what you're trying to do.

A lot of the writing process isn't really involving the writing on the keyboard. Most of it involves trying to figure out how to put this together like a film director would storyboard.

If I had to sum up the story in three words, what would the words be? I did one recently where the word was "fear." It was about [artificial intelligence] and a woman who is involved with IBM and AI. A lot of the stuff about fear was stuff that she had overcome as a woman rising through the business ranks.

But it was also the idea of A.I. and what's going on with that. So it all fit together as a theme. It was just more about writing about people, but it started with the idea of what kind of is a central theme here? What's a universal theme that other people can relate to?

How do you go about asking your questions to bring that out in your words but also when you're hanging out

with someone you're really not sitting down and having an interview like this. So how do you go about structuring your questions?

I do have sit-down interviews with them. I have the initial one where I try to just kind of set the parameters of what we'd like to try to do. And there are some questions I'm getting in there, basic ones like where are you from or things I want to make sure I'm accurate with.

Then I'll also have another interview. Maybe it's an hour of just sitting and talking, like an old-fashioned interview and then other times I'm hanging out with them.

It's kind of a fly-on-the wall approach, trying to pick up dialogue they're having with people, but also ask some questions. Oftentimes that's where you get the best quotes, because they're comfortable with you and it doesn't feel stilted.

It's really difficult in a one-on-one interview to make somebody feel comfortable because they know they're being interviewed. You're often dealing with people who may not normally be dealing with reporters or questions. So it's just uncomfortable.

When you do spend more time, and you're in a place where they're comfortable, they are more apt to have a conversation with you. The whole goal for me is to make it seem like we're just having a conversation. Ultimately, I want to write in a conversational way, so when people read it they feel like they're just hearing a story because that's what it is.

So how do you go about outlining and why do you think it's so important?

There's no right or wrong way to write. Some people write differently. For me, it's just a way to organize my

thoughts. I tend to over research and over report, and I end up with so much fish in a net that I get a little lost in the process.

There's always a point in writing these things where I get a little freaked out like I don't know what to do with all this. Outlining, for me, is just trying to figure out which fish to throw out of the net. I don't need these, I don't need these, oh this one is pretty good.

So how do you go about starting your writing process once you finish your outline?

I'm not necessarily starting with the first paragraph. I'll just start cutting and pasting basic facts where I know they need to go. It's like a puzzle.

Once I get to the point where I'm ready to start writing, I won't say it's easy, but the actual typing it up I have been through it in my head, and then it's a matter of trying to fine-tune the words themselves. That's the fun part — when you're trying to figure out the best way to say it.

The hard part is figuring out what you want to say and where you want to say it in the story.

What is your editing process as you write?

I edit as I go. I'll write the first section, and then I'll keep working on that and I'll rewrite things. I don't sit there and write all 3,000 words and then go back. I break it down and focus on certain parts of the story that need some more fine-tuning, so I'm rewriting a lot even as I do it.

To be honest, sometimes I do all of that outlining, but sometimes it changes as I start to write it, because what I thought I was going to emphasize a lot, the more I got into it, the more I realized maybe that's only a paragraph. It's not gonna be 400 words of what I thought was really going to be in the story.

I'm always kind of refining even as I go through the typing process.

Another metaphor I use is the outline is really the Christmas tree that you cut down. It is the tree. But the writing is the ornaments you put on it.

If I have a tree I know what the shape is, I know what it looks like, then I'm free to hang ornaments wherever I want.

How do you get tone and voice in your features?

I'm constantly just reminding myself to write with my ears. What does it sound like? Does it have a lyricism to it? Does it have a rhythm to it? I'm trying to fit a conversational tone.

I want people to feel like it's just you and I sitting down at a bar, and I'm telling you a really cool story about something that happened today. I don't want it to read like an academic paper or a lawyer's paper. I want it to be just a story.

What makes feature writing so difficult?

The challenge is to take something that people think they know about and try to present it to them in a fresh way, in a different way that makes them stop and think or learn something or understand something better. That's a real challenge, especially when you're dealing with people who are well-known.

But even then when I do all the research on somebody, if it's somebody that is well-known, I think to myself, "What nuggets are there that could be blown into a story itself or what is it that hasn't been written about this person."

It's trying to look for a fresh angle or a fresh way to go about it.

What is the secret to good feature writing?

Curiosity. It's keeping your mind open, your eyes open, your ears open. Put people who read this story in a place where they can't or don't normally go and make them feel like they're with you on a journey.

That takes a lot of openness. I don't ever go in with preconceived ideas. I'll have thoughts about something, but I don't go in rolling out anything when I need somebody to talk. Sometimes what I think is going to be the story ends up not being the story at all.

Being open to any possibilities and willing to follow those paths is the key.

SECTION II

INTERVIEWING

Some parts of this section were excerpted from “Always Get the Name of the Dog” by Nicole Kraft, published in 2019 by Taylor & Francis.

7.

Let's Interview

'The more conversational you are, the more you seem invested in what they have to say, the more willing they are going to be to open up'

"Some of the best advice I can give to young reporters in an interview is to just shut up."
Mike Wagner

Most of us think interviews are simply asking questions and getting answers, but true interview skills come from asking the right questions of the right sources and gathering all of the information your reader needs and wants to know.



Interviewing is best done like a conversation with a strong direction and purpose.

An interview can be defined as an interaction between two people, where questions are asked to elicit information. They are the key, quite simply, to information transmission, be it socially, formally or in business. And that is why journalists use interviews every day to find and report the news that keeps

a society informed.

If that sounds like a conversation, good because that is the fundamental structure of an interview done well. But that is not all it is.

“It’s almost like any relationship in life — the more conversational you are, the more you seem invested in what they have to say, the more willing they are going to be to open up,” The Athletic’s Zack Meisel said. “It takes time.”

Too often journalists view interviews solely as the time and space in which to ask questions they have jotted into a notebook. That is a logical but superficial view. The quality and useful end product of an interview come actually from a lengthy equation combining:

- Knowledge your story.
- Identifying the facts of your story.
- Determining what information you need for that story.
- Determining what kind of sources you need to

- get that information.
- Finding sources for that story who can provide the answers you need.
 - Working out when and where to meet those sources.
 - Conceptualizing a mix of open- and closed-ended questions to get the information you need.
 - Asking questions in a way that they can get the facts you need and result in at least some good, usable quotes.
 - Getting information down quickly and accurately.
 - Selecting which facts and quotes best present information your reader needs.

Sounds simple, right?

In truth, interviews are anything but simple, as they involve asking questions that reflect the information sought as clearly, yet conversationally, as possible. They require listening to and analyzing answers, while at the same time figuring out what to ask next. Interviewers must be nimble, ready to react in the event an answer results in a change to the direction of the conversation or, more significantly, the article being pursued. Interviewers read body language and between the lines of what is and is not being said.

“That is something that just doesn’t get taught a lot in collegiate programs,” said Lucas Sullivan of The Dispatch. “I never had a professor tell me if you just invest the time and learn how to talk to someone like a human being that is half the battle. Instead, you get this very clinical, look at this report and look at how



Interviews can be one-on-one or done in a scrum with other reporters.

they did it and look at the sources and list all the sources to me. You never get the behind the scenes, like how do you really craft this web and that is how it is really done. It is really done by putting in the time. You could do this too. Someone in your life or someone at a bar or someone you are riding the bus with. Test yourself and see if you can get them to tell you one personal thing about them. Then you start to hone that and you feel comfortable.”

Much like a house will crumble on a weak foundation, so do articles founder when based on poor interviews. The quality of sources, the depth of the questions, the understanding of the subject, and the ability to transmit that subject information to others are key to successful journalism. And much of them start with the interviews conducted with sources who provide journalism with the primary source material.

Just because you can ask a question does not mean you have conducted an interview. Understanding these basics behind what makes a strong interview will get us started.

It’s all about the conversation

We interview every day. They might start by asking a family member or roommate how their day might unfold. It might continue in class or at a job while you figure out the parameters of an assignment. It might happen in a restaurant when you are trying to figure out what on the menu might be gluten-free. When your doctor asks questions to diagnose a cough that is lingering, she is conducting an interview.

Not every encounter, however, is as fruitful as it could be, and we have all had moments of miscommunication (at best), or even unintended offense (at worst). A conversation cannot truly be successful unless both parties are engaged and care about what the other said. As [Stephen R. Covey](#) said in "[The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change](#)," "Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply." The same is true in journalistic interviewing.

"I ask myself, what are my main objectives for this interview?" Sullivan said. "What do you want to leave knowing, getting, whatever from this interview? That is how I frame. I am not someone who writes down my questions. I have them in my head usually they are just topics that I want to go through because I want to have a conversation. I don't want to just say OK I am on question seven of my 10 questions.

"Try not to be so rigid about it and you have to ask yourself before you go in, what are my objectives? What do I hope to leave with? And ask the questions accordingly.

Think about the biggest challenges we face in communicating conversationally:

- Distractions, like texting while others talk.
- Asking closed questions that require one-word responses.
- Talking about what we know instead of finding out what others know.
- Asking questions because we feel we have to, without caring about the answer.

The same issues run parallel in journalism. Distracted communication comes from scribbling instead of making eye contact and worrying so much about what question comes next that you fail to hear what your source is saying about the current question. We pretend we understand because we fear to look stupid. We ask questions without truly caring about the answer.

In feature interviewing done well, there is likely to be another element to the interviewing process that goes beyond the formal process we imagine of traditional reporting. This other form of interviewing is more casual — the walk and talk while exploring a place of work, a kitchen conversation. This is when watching and feeling become just as important as hearing and writing.

The way people speak and move can reveal much about them — from education to age, ethnicity to ethics. To uncover these nuggets means going beyond the words to the voice, mannerisms and gestures that make people come to life on the page.

8.

Interviewing Basics

Key to getting good answers is asking the good questions

“I try to make it a conversation and to make it a conversation between equals as much as possible. The person is good at what they do, and that’s probably why you’re interviewing them.”

Charles Leehrsen

There are five key areas to focus on as the building blocks of interviewing:

Research: At a cocktail party, it may be OK to start a conversation without having any background information

at all, but not so in interviews. The basics of interviewing start long before a single question is asked, for in journalism there can indeed be stupid questions. For the most part, they are born from a lack of preparation.

Familiarizing yourself with as much background on a topic or subject as you reasonably can bring you to an interview from a position of strength.

Sources: Anyone can answer a question, but how do you find the right person to answer the questions when you need answers? First, have an idea of what you need to know. Next, figure out who can provide that information. Finally, develop a relationship with that person that will allow them to share that information with you.

Questions and answers: You have done your research and have the perfect source, but now you need to ask questions that are relevant to the source and the topic, and to entice that source to share with you what they know. In some cases, it's more than what they know — it's what they feel or believe or analyze — and you have to get them to share in ways that provide facts, quotes and anecdotes.

Getting it down: Complex research, perfect sources, insightful questions and great quotes — but did you capture them accurately? That could be the rub! Getting quotes and facts down accurately is a key part of any interview, and it is far more difficult than imagined. For quotes to be quotes, they must be verbatim. But sources talk fast and their answers can ramble. They might say something as a fact that isn't factual at all. Learning to take accurate notes and fact-check is imperative.

Right questions, right people: New reporters always ask, "Should I interview a student for this?" or "Should I call the university president's office about this?" It is impossible to answer without knowing what your story is

about and what information you need from that source to help readers' understanding of that story topic. If your story is about why the university decided to raise tuition, there is no real need to interview students. If your story is about how people most affected feel about a proposed tuition hike, then you absolutely need to talk to students.

Are we on the record?

Once you start talking to a source and identify you are writing a story, you are "on the record," meaning anything that is said is available to be utilized in your article.

A source can ask to go "off the record," which means you cannot use the material they are providing, but it is being shared for your information only.

Off the record is not retroactive. A sentence spoken cannot then be deemed off the record just because the source wishes it. You as the writer have the option of whether to keep the information out of the story.

Sources can also provide information under these conditions:

Not for attribution: The information can be used with a vague title but not a name, as in "a White House official said."

On background: The information can be taken to another source to try and get it confirmed. "Sources have told me this. Can you confirm it?"

Most people can learn how to write an article in a given style — from news to features, investigations and immersion. But too often the foundation of those articles is weak. We don't research subjects well enough to fully

understand them. We don't ask the right questions or dig deep enough with the people who know these subjects the best. We don't let people talk and share with the depth needed to help the readers fully engage with the information that frames news.

"Dialogue is very important to feature writing," Misti Crane said. "Figure out ways to be present during natural interactions between people and to not insert yourself into those so that you hang out and figure out who they are and how they interact with other people. And learn how to place that dialogue within the story in a way that helps your reader understand this person better."

Beginning the Conversation

LeBron James first came to the Cleveland Cavaliers and declined requests for one-on-one interviews. But [Tom Withers](#) of the Associated Press was not going to give up.

"I didn't badger them, but I stayed on top of it and reminded (the team) I'd love the chance to sit down."

Finally, he got his opportunity at a turkey giveaway at a Baptist church. James was sitting at a table, surrounded by his "posse," and Withers admitted the first few minutes of their dialogue felt forced and uncomfortable. But after a few minutes, James dismissed everyone but Withers, and the two began to talk.

"We got into deeper stuff with LeBron talking about his absentee father, the struggles of his mom, and finally I hit a chord with him where it shifted and he began recalling the difficulty of his childhood. He went back to where he was as a little boy — while he was talking to me.

"[That became the lede](#), when he closed his eyes and, for that moment, he was 8 years old again."

If journalism is all about stories, then interviewing is all about the conversations that lead to those stories. It is no

accident that “view” is part of the word “interview.” An interviewer’s goal is to see in words, facts and information, opinions and quotes.

The most successful print or multimedia interviewers see an interview subject as the most fascinating person they might have met at a cocktail party, but one on which they have conducted extensive research and already know what information they might want to glean from talking with them.

Where interviewers fail is they think in terms of questions. We must instead think in terms of answers.

It’s not a matter of crafting the perfect question and hoping to get the right answer. Rather, think of what answer you want or need, and then determine how to ask a question to get that response. Remember to think like the reader. For most people, the answer to one question leads to another question, and so on, until their curiosity is satiated. You must think for readers to answer their questions before they even know to ask.

[John Sawatsky](#) of ESPN, a Canadian author, journalist and interviewing expert, describes interviews as a function of the questions asked. He told students at Y-Press, a nonprofit Indiana youth-media organization, that a bad answer means there is something wrong in the question. In his view, good questions have two components — a topic and a demand. The topic must be narrow enough to get a good answer. He cites these examples:

“What do you think about the Yankees winning last night? (Broad)

“What do you think about the home run hit in the bottom of the seventh inning in the game the Yankees won last night? (Narrower).

The key to getting good answers is asking the best questions you can in a structure that compels your subject to want to answer as fully and colorfully as possible. Here are some guidelines.

Keep questions open-ended

Question Formation 101 revolves around the two major types of questions we can ask:

Closed-Ended: Result in one-word answers, often “yes” or “know.”

- Do you like your job?
- Did you enjoy visiting Croatia?
- How old are you?

You need them for some questions that are more fact-based (like the age one), but relying on them results in confirmation of facts but no insights or useful quotes.

Open-ended: These questions let people extrapolate in their answers, and they provide more insights and quotability. A lot of times these questions take the form of:

“How did you feel...”

“What were you thinking when...”

Describe how you...”

Beware Leading Questions

You hear these questions in sports all the time: “Coach, don’t you think that play in the third quarter showed the power of your offense?” When they say, “Sure,” that becomes a fact in your story. Your job is not to tell a source what he or she is thinking, but rather to ask questions that let them contemplate, and formulate thoughts and ideas related to your article topic.

The Writer's Process with Adam Jardy

"I like to have notes in front of me, and I will spend a day or two generally writing down sort of the big points that I want to get to or I am interested in. I will write out very specific questions that will get at a topic that I have identified as part of the overall story but the questions that I will ask will often start off very vague.

"I kind of script out to keep me on track or to keep myself focused a little bit. But I start out kind of vague and then depending on — getting a feel for the mood, the tone and how things are going — I can adjust from there, should the follow-up be this or should it be that. So I will often have not necessarily an outline but I have questions in a specific order that I think are the best way to get at a topic.



Adam Jardy

"You have to be very present in the moment. If you want to know exactly what you can and can't talk about or what this person is or is not comfortable talking about, you have to be very engaged with how they're reacting to what you're asking them. You have to be respectful and I don't know if I can stress that enough, no matter what you're writing about.

"I did a story about [Ohio State men's basketball coach] [Chris Holtmann](#) and where he's from. He was on a very well-regarded basketball team there in his senior season. I talked to

people who have never even met Chris Holtmann but who were around for when that happened. When I was interviewing these people you have to approach it from the aspect of this is incredibly meaningful and important to them and I have to be respectful of that. Just because a team making a final four in Kentucky doesn't register to a kid growing up in Ohio doesn't make it any less meaningful for this city in Kentucky.

“It comes back to preparation and it comes back to just understanding who you're writing about and who your audience is. You have to understand that it's very important to them and that no matter what you're writing if they're taking the time to talk to you, they deserve your respect and you have to make sure you give it to them. From that respect that's when you can sometimes get into deeper, more meaningful, more emotional types of questions.”

9.

Relating to sources

It's all about building relationships

*"Don't write about man. Write about a man."
E.B. White*

If [Lucas Sullivan](#) had to bet on which question he will be asked when he speaks to young journalists, he would win money every time with the answer, “How do I get sources?”

The answer is both simple and time-consuming.



Lucas Sullivan

“Sourcing just comes down to putting in the work,” he said. “It involves you really showing up and meeting face to face. You have to show them that you are a human being. If you are nervous that is OK; you just need to relax and find a way to relate to them and know a little bit about them before you go into the interview. Show them that you have invested some time and show that you care.”

Sullivan points out that news sourcing and feature sourcing are often two different things. At the core, both involve conversations and relating with people on a “human being basis,” but features require a far more nuanced touch than the surgical strike of a news story.

“It is about relating,” he said. “It is like picking up that significant other on that first date and trying to relate, and have a flowing discussion and not be awkward. You really need to work on honing those skills if you want to be a good source builder. It can’t be done from your desk.”

Sullivan said that when he is assigned a feature, the first thing he does is take a legal pad and write down everyone he might want to talk to. He then goes through that list and makes calls.

“If I talk to someone and he suggests someone else, I’ll add that to the list,” he said. “That’s where it all starts. Go through all of this and do levels of reporting.

“When I finally sit down to write, it shouldn’t be that difficult. The key is plotting it all out. If you’ve done all the reporting, you should be able to do the writing.”

Sullivan advocates the technique of keeping the notebook closed and the recorder off and just talking first to build a rapport. On a daily story that could be five minutes; on a longer feature it could be the first full meeting.”

Sullivan said he has done stories where he wants to spend six months as part of a source’s life, and in their first meeting, he might not open his notebook at all.

“That gets you out of the mindset of I have to gather these facts to build this story that I already have an idea of how this is going to go,” he said. “It also keeps you open to where this conversation might take you and builds their comfort level so that when you open up your notebook for the first time they are not feeling as on the spot and they have some sort of comfort with you.”

Listen more than you talk and that can be hard for any reporter, Sullivan admitted. When writers are just starting out, there can be an inclination to decide what the feature is before the interview even starts. That, however, usually ends up in a less-than-fruitful conversation between people because the writer is not there to find out what the story is about.

“Not having a list of 15 questions when you show up may allow you to let the conversation go the way the conversation goes,” Sullivan said. “Ask follow-up questions, make it a point not to look at the list of 10 questions that you have. Most of the best quotes that I ever

got in 20 years of being a newspaper reporter were after I had closed my notebook and we kept talking. The person would just say something that blew my mind and then I would open my notebook back up and the conversation would go a different way.”

Sullivan is also a big proponent of letting silence be your best interview companion.

“It is uncomfortable for people to just sit there and be quiet for a minute,” he said. “Those pregnant pauses are doors for them to be open. Sometimes those moments are when somebody will say, ‘You know what else...’ because they had a moment to breathe and think.

“They can feel pressured by your question sometimes and just say [the first thing] they think of or the thing they think you want to hear. Sometimes if you let there be some space after that initial question they will say the thing that has the most meaning to them.”

10.

Questions and Answers

*'I work hard for them to trust them and related
to me as a human being'*

When you're interviewing someone, you're in control. When you're being interviewed, you think you're in control, but you're not.

Barbara Walters

Few things sound more artificial than reading a question off a piece of paper or an iPad to your subject, and chances are their answers will be just as stiff.

Instead, use your list of questions as a guideline, as opposed to a mandate.

Think about phrasing each question like you are sitting across from an acquaintance or friend at a coffee shop, and use similar phraseology and body language.

Rather than asking verbatim question No. 1 in the new major example, try, “I was looking through the major, and it seems really interesting. I wondered where the idea came from to put all this together as a major.”

Go with the Flow

Deciding the order for your questions is one of the most challenging and important interview skills you can develop.

The flow of questions needs to seem natural and conversational. That means recognizing your subject may answer your questions out of order — before you’ve even had a chance to ask them — or they make take you in different directions than you had intended.

Listen to how the responses are coming in, and see if there is a natural flow at work. Don’t just ask question No. 5 because it follows question No. 4. It’s possible based on the subject’s response that question No. 10 is a much more logical follow-up, or that you have gone into uncharted territory.

“Typically, I go in with some questions prepared but ... you’ve got to leave yourself some space for follow-ups, that’s how you get deeper, that’s how you get those anecdotes,” Zack Meisel said. “A lot of times I’ll write down a list of questions and then I won’t even look at them. Again, you’re just going with the flow and you’re going based [on] what they say and they are talking and I don’t want to just be staring down at my list thinking ‘OK what question am I asking next?’ They might have something interesting that they’re about to say that you didn’t know that you want to follow up on.”

Body language

There are few things more disconcerting than being asked a question and the interviewer is slumped in a chair, huddled over a notebook and doesn't make any eye contact when you are talking. Try to lean in as you ask questions so your source recognizes that you are interested in the answer.

Just ask the question already

It is imperative to know what you want to ask, and then just ask it. Some interviewers ramble on so long asking the question, it's a wonder the subject remembers the topic.

"I kind of call it the Charlie Rose syndrome where he asks this long, involved question, and he's talking and talking and talking," author [Sarah Saffian](#) said. "Basically the interesting subject he had on his show just says 'yea' or 'no,' and that's the quote. It's one thing if it's broadcast journalism because you get to see the interchange, but for a print journalist all you've got is this one-word quote and that's not working."

Listen

It is easy to ask questions. What is far more difficult is to actually listen to what someone is saying, especially while you are taking notes, jotting down follow-up opportunities and trying to think of your next question.

It is imperative that you really hear the answers and let sources talk, without interrupting, until they have finished their thought. Only then will you know where the interview is going next.

Award-winning journalist and author [Mac McClelland](#) can always tell when a person is just going down their questions without really caring about the answer.

"You say something and then there are follow-up questions, and you're thinking, 'You are totally not

listening to what I'm saying," McClelland said. "That's not how I approach conversations with people in normal circumstances, and I assume most people don't either.

"If you have the habit of listening to your friends when they're talking to you, it's the same sort of courtesy you should be extending to strangers, to actually listen to them."

Following up

Follow-up questions are designed to allow sources to converse further on subjects they have broached, even though you might not have been planning to go there.

Remember that you need to understand the issue or topic before you can ever share it with a reader, so some useful follow-up questions will include:

"Would you tell me a bit more about that?"

"Can you give me an example?"

"How did you feel about that?"

"Can you break that down a bit further in layman terms?"

A reporter's best technique can be to act far less informed than he or she may actually be.

The second you let a source know that you have some expertise, they can be inclined to jump ahead, skipping over key details (and quotes) that your story and reader will need.

"Follow-up questions are huge," Meisel said. "That's where you're going to get the juicy stuff. You're not going to write down, 'Tell me about growing up in the Dominican Republic and playing baseball in the streets.' That's fine, if that's what you want to ask. But when they tell you you're probably going to want to ask 'OK, were you using a baseball, did you have to use something else, were you using a stick as a bat?' I think it's something you

just get better at with time as you get that feel for those secondary questions that get you the better details.”

How many questions do you need?

Journalists the world over debate how many questions to bring to an interview — if any. There are those who write questions out — usually between 10 and 20 — and those who write out topics to cover.

“Way back when I was on the daily paper at Penn State, I remember our adviser telling us to have no less than 20 questions no matter how long or short the interview,” magazine writer [Sally Kuzemchak](#) said. “I can’t say that I do 20 now, but I feel like 10 is a good number. If I need one quote for one graph and I sort of already know the gist of what I want them to say, I could go into that interview with one question, but I try very hard to have a list.”

The Bell Curve

Every interview has questions that are easy to answer (how long have you been married?), harder to answer (why did you leave the company you founded?) and all kinds of questions in between (let’s talk about where that idea came from).

The question for you is: In what order do you ask your interview questions?

Remember that this interview is a conversation, so what would happen if you shook hands with a new acquaintance and immediately started talking about their recent divorce, a lost job or the fact his neighbors think his or her yard is a dump.

Chances are that conversation won’t last long.

The same can apply when you are interviewing a school board candidate who learned she was [unendorsed by her party](#) for making comments supporting charter schools. When you sit down to interview her, think about how you

can lay a path that will take you to the big news but will make her comfortable enough to want to get there with you.

Be sure to start by saying hello and asking how she is, or how her day has been. I don't mean to be patronizing, but many a young reporter is so focused on starting an interview that he or she forgets to be polite.

Then we could try talking about the campaign and how it's going. Commiserate that the end is near and talk about how she is feeling — tired, invigorated, etc. If you know a subject is delicate, acknowledge it: "I know things just got a bit tougher with the unendorsement. Let's talk about that"

The point is, you have made her feel like a person, not just a source. And chances are she will answer you person-to-person, and not with rehearsed answers (at best) or defensive ones (at worst).

Brittany Schock of the Richland Source did a series on [infant mortality](#), which included interviewing women who had lost their babies. She knew the order in which she asked her questions would determine how deep the women would get in talking of their loss.

"You don't start with, 'How did you feel when your baby died,'" she said. "Even before I hit 'record,' to get down her comments, we'd talk about life, the latest movie they saw. I'd ask them to tell me about their daughter, their other kids, what do they remember about when she was born and the craziness of a newborn. Then I ask them to tell me what happened when you lost her. A lot of times they don't even realize they are uncomfortable. They don't realize they are nervous. It's just so natural a conversation.

"I work hard for them to trust them and relate to me as a human being. My goal was making them comfortable with

me as a person before talking about precarious things. And I'd tell them, 'Let me know if you need to stop,' and tell them I was so thankful for them telling me this story, as it was going to help a lot of people."

Chess anyone?

I truthfully think of every interview like I am playing a game of chess.



Thinking of an interview like a game of chess can help you anticipate how a source may react to a question.

The key to chess is not just moving pieces — it is understanding how your opponent will react to your move and how you will react to their reaction.

The same is true in interviewing

In chess, if you make a move without thinking how your opponent will react to it, you will surely fail. Similarly, in interviewing, if you don't think ahead to what the answer will be to your question, you may, at best, simply not get the answer you want or need. At worst, you may be faced with an uncomfortable situation that alienates your subject.

SECTION III

WRITING TO BE
READ

11.

Outlining

*To outline or not outline, that is a question
only the writer can answer*

**“The first sentence can’t be written until
the final sentence is written.”
Joyce Carol Oates**

How you begin to write your article is a personal preference for most writers, and there are a variety of styles from which to choose.

[Adam Jardy](#) of the Columbus Dispatch recalls a seventh-grade English teacher who insisted every paper that he wrote include an outline.

And he hated it.

“I didn’t even consider myself much of a writer at that point but that just burned me to my core,” said Jardy.

“When I sat down to write things, that was not how my brain comprehended things”

To outline or not outline is a continuing debate among writers, and there is truly not a correct answer. For some, it is a limiting exercise. For others it is as important as a skeleton, providing organization and structure.

In truth, every writer organizes in some way. My style is to organize through transcription — as I put the notes into publishable form, I add subheads to categorize subjects. I then move those subjects around in the order I see them in the story.

Jardy said he seeks more ambiguity as he lets the story unfold, then as he writes it, it starts to take shape and makes more sense to him.

“I feel like I’m always thinking about [the structure], especially when I’m working on a really big story or feature that I’m really interested in,” he said. “There’s a flow to it and the more you do it the more it makes sense.”

Jardy recalled writing a story about [how Ohio State basketball preps for a game](#). He watched film with the coaches, at least two practices, a shoot-around and how they played a game. He estimates he spent 20 to 30 hours gathering all the information. And the whole time he was formulating in his head how to write the story.

“It’s always turning over in my brain somehow,” he said. “By the time I sit down to write, I generally feel like by then I have a handle on what I’m doing. Something has bubbled its way to the top of my brain as far as ‘This is the most interesting thing, this is the big picture, this is how I get into the story, this is the lede.’”

“You have to believe in the reporting that you’ve done, the work that you’ve done, the interviewing that you’ve done. You’ve got to have all that in front of you and believe

that you can connect all the dots, and from that, you can draw what's important, what are you writing, what are you not writing.”

Jardy admitted every writer has his or her own process, but he said he just sits down and starts writing.

“Staring at a blank screen doesn't help you,” he said. “There's nothing wrong with putting something down and having to go back and change it later. Sometimes just getting a couple of words out it just starts the process then the brain starts working because creativity comes out and it takes over. But just getting started sometimes, getting those first couple of sentences, it just picks up steam from there.”

Many writers — and I am among them — must have a lede in place before they can begin to structure the remainder of the story. That does not mean the lede will stand through until publication, but it does open the door for me to walk through as the writer, so I can see and craft the nut graph and structure a body that comes off of that nut graph.

“I can't do anything till I have my lede or something that will end up being close to my lede,” Zack Meisel of *The Athletic* confirms. “I'll just get something down, then go from beginning to finish and outline it, then write through it a million times until I'm satisfied.”

Abby Vesoulis of *Time* said that after reporting she organizes her notes and then seeks out the lede.

“I love anecdotal ledes that start with a person who talks about this problem that they had, and then you pivot from that and say something like ‘She's not alone, as 130 million Americans also face this problem and after years of it being ignored this is why it has become a hot issue.’ Then

you get into the tension that has prevented it from becoming enacted at this point.

“The lede is a snapshot of the problem and the nut graph said why we’re doing this story right now, the tension that prevents it from getting accomplished and then a 20,000-foot perspective of saying what has to get accomplished to make this a reality.”

Other writers will structure the nut graph first, and others may tackle the conclusion before anything.

Outlining your story may be the way to go for you, which would mean identifying the nut graph and then ordering the body by subject matter, so you can see how the parts and pieces fit together.

Misti Crane at Ohio State advocated creating an outline based on the themes of this story, which she said will provide a useful framework for what could be notebooks filled with reporting.

“A lot of it comes back to the [five-paragraph essay] sort of framework,” she said. “What are the key points you are making? If you have three notebooks full of notes for a 1,500-word feature and you just start going through your notebook, you are screwed. You have to figure out that the outline format of key points and being really disciplined about only adding details and dialogue that fit strictly into the framework of the story is one way of doing it.”

Mike Wagner of *The Dispatch* said he writes down in a Word document the five or six themes he wants to represent in an article.

“You are going to highlight those impact things and then write around those,” he said. “You add your information.”

Just as many reporters outline in their head, said Wagner’s investigative reporting partner, Lucas Sullivan.

“Coming back from an interview, I always go through what were the highlights,” he said. “If I was going to tell anyone about what I just experienced, I say, ‘OK, what would I tell them.’”

“You have to be able to tell yourself, your editor, your roommate or whatever what was the top few things that you take away from that interview. What would you use? I think that helps you write your lede and is the crux of a good article. You have to have that mental conversation of OK if someone would ask me what is the top moment I took away from that interview, what is it? Then everything sort of falls into place after that.”

I similarly gather all of my notes in written (transcribed) form and then organize them based on the subject matter. I will use headers like “History” and “Early Days” and “Conclusion” and then get narrower.

By moving all the quotes on those subjects together, I can see how the anecdotes and facts begin to flow from one to the other, and see if the structure makes logical sense before I begin too much writing.

Then I start turning fact-based quotes into paraphrases and anecdotes and structuring the quotes I need to support them.

When I see the anecdote I want for the lede, I move it to the top of my document. The concluding anecdote or quote then gets placed at the end of the document.



Melissa Hoppert

[Melissa Hoppert](#) of the New York Times takes a similar approach. She tapes every interaction — in person or on the phone — and then types out all of her quotes “to see what I have.” As she goes through the tapes, she will bold the elements that seem to “jump out.”

“I will have thousands of things bolded,” she said.

“The things that stuck out in my mind from the start of the story, I put those at the top of the file. That way, as I start to write I know what I want to include. At the end of the process, I’ll have maybe 10 things I want to get in. As I start to write, I keep writing from my list. It’s almost like building a puzzle.”

That doesn’t mean, however, that outlining is for everyone, and linear writing may not be the best approach. Steve Rushin of Sports Illustrated said he has never made an outline and instead puts the notes as he organizes them in the chronological way he wants the story to be told.

“I was always told to make a formal outline, but that’s drudgery and a straitjacket to me,” Rushin said. “Don’t feel like you have to start at the start. That’s the tyranny of the cursor looking at you. Write anything. Write the end, then write the middle. Write a sentence. If you know you have a quote you want to use, put that down.”

Michael Farber of Sports Illustrated suggests young writers go even a step further by approaching not a

3,000-word article but instead writing three 1,000-word pieces or six 500-word pieces, each tying into each other.

“Maybe start with a scene that lends insight into whoever you’re writing about,” he suggested. “Break into blocks if that is what will make you comfortable with. One will flow into the next.

You can write several 400-500 word pieces. They don’t have to be equal chunks.”

To Outline or Not?

“When I was writing one story, I left my notebooks [unopened]. Then I sat down and forced myself to try to write the story from memory the way I would tell the story to a friend. Then I would get the notebooks to find the quotes I wanted and put them in. I know a lot of people who record and transcribe, and then you have everything in all this detail, and that can be really helpful but it also can be detrimental to good storytelling. Pull yourself away from what the notes say and think about what the important parts of the story are.”

Mike Wagner, Columbus Dispatch

“I write out all the quotes, transcribe everything, then kind of review that. In your mind, I think you start to build the story into maybe four or five sections if you’re doing a 4,000-5,000 word story. Then I start to think of, how am I going to tell this? Chronological? Is it going to be a flashback, is it going to be back and forth? Usually, it becomes fairly apparent through the interview process I think. Once you’ve written so many of these longer features it kind of falls into a couple of different categories; you have experience on what

has worked well in the past and what doesn't work. I think you mentally start to compartmentalize things. That's why for me it's important to write out quotes, then I'll almost know what section what is going to go in. Sometimes it changes, sometimes you write and you think 'no this needs to be moved up,' but I think for the most part you have a mental outline."

Tom Reed

12.

Writing it Out

Writing to be read from beginning to end

“I can shake off everything as I write; my sorrows disappear, my courage is reborn.”

Anne Frank

To embrace feature writing is to abandon the rules that governed us in news: write short and tight, keep vocabulary simple. Feature writing still relies on facts, but now they are wrapped in more detail and narrative, the storytelling that brings in readers and keeps them reading.

Consider how you might approach a breaking news story, like a shooting outside a campus-area McDonald’s. The first story presents the facts: “A man is in critical condition after being shot in the parking lot of a campus-

area McDonald's early Sunday morning." The story would give facts, with quotes from police and witnesses.

A follow-up feature, however, might tackle the story from the student's point of view, describing in the lede how Joe Smith had stopped by the McDonald's after a night out with friends.

Smith was just stepping up to the counter to place his order of a Big Mac and large fries when he heard it — pop, pop pop, like fireworks.

Only he knew it wasn't fireworks.

And it wasn't a backfiring car.

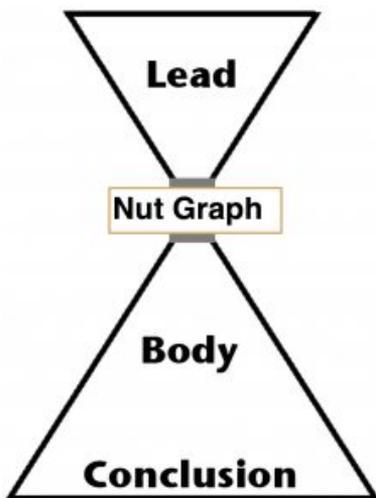
It was gunshots. And they were right outside.

We would follow with the who, what, when, where and how of this story — namely that 24 hours after a shooting near campus, students are still shaken by the crack in their perception of campus as a safe environment.

Notice that the writer will have central characters who we get to know and care about. This is feature writing.

The writing hourglass

Unlike news articles, in which the most important information is told first, followed by the next most important info, then the next most important information, all the way down to the least important information, features are written to be read from beginning to end.



The Writing Hourglass

To do that, we have to write differently. And so we craft the feature writing hourglass.

The top of the hourglass is a narrative lede, pouring information and emotion toward a focused point that tells us what the article is about, which we call the [nut graph](#).

Once the story passes through that nut graph juncture, it is clarified and focused and the body that follows (the bottom of the

hourglass) supports the nut graph through examples and sources and anecdotes. The strong base of the hourglass holds up the story, providing a broad and fulfilling finish that is often a quote or anecdote.

The key to this structure is understanding how all aspects of the story are tied together and contained within the hourglass framework.

We can't get into the story without a smooth flow of the lede toward and through the nut graph, which serves as the connector between the lede and the body. The body must then allow the ideas presented in the nut graph to broaden, but they have to stay connected to what is presented in the nut graph. No sand can flow outside of the hourglass, and no ideas can leave the framework presented in the nut graph.

The conclusion then lets the whole enterprise settle to

completion and holds up the feeling of the story as being complete.

13.

Writing with Anecdotes

The stories that make articles come to life

*“Don’t tell me the moon is shining; show me
the glint of light on broken glass.”*
Anton Chekhov

Anecdotes are by definition short, compelling or entertaining stories about real incidents or real people, that help a subject become more relatable and true to life.

We share stories about our day, illustrate situations in our lives and try to connect with others through moments that can be shared.

Anecdotes are also the stories that make your articles

come to life, illustrating your main point so the reader can see what the story will be about.

Consider a story is about the challenges of back-to-school clothes shopping. You could say Jeanette Burns' daughter wanted to go buy new clothes, but economics meant they ended up at the Volunteers of America Thrift Store where their money would go much further.

But I see it better if you show me:

Jeanette Burns pushes the hangers from left to right, her eye scanning first the color and style, then the price and finally the label to confirm the size. The sound of hangers scraping along the metal pole is hypnotic.

Three feet away by the empty cart, 12-year-old Naveah stands with her arms crossed, lips in a tight horizontal line, her eyes narrow. School was five days away, and her four-inch summer growth spurt had cost Neveah her favorite outfits. Now she watched as her mother pawed through other people's hand-me-downs, waiting to see which ones would soon fill her closet.

That, my friends, is an anecdote.

We use them every day to help people see and experience the world as we do.

There are really only two ways to uncover true anecdotes for your articles:

1. Get someone to describe them.
2. Experience them yourself.

Much of what we write about has already happened, so we are beholden to those who experienced the situation to describe for us what happened. To do that, though, they need to be asked in ways that will help pull out the story.

- “Give me an example of that.”
- “Describe when that happened.”

- “Walk me through.”

In class, we often use the example of the roommate from hell — which it seems is consistent among college students.

Let’s say the nut graph of our story for a feature is how to cope with the college roommate from hell. To fully understand the nut graph, we need to see an example. So we interview students who have had bad roommates and ask them to share what exactly that experience was like.

Let’s say a source said of his roommate, “He was dirty.”

We could leave it to our imagination what dirty means, or we could ask more questions to get more specifics.

That led one student to relate that his roommate, who he thinks only bathed twice in the entire semester, used to cut his facial hair and fingernails — and leave the clippings in the kitchen sink.

Now I understand dirty.

I once [interviewed a mother](#) four years after her son had died. She was the last person to see him alive and found him unresponsive in his hotel bed. Blurting out a question like, “What happened when you found your son’s body?” would not get me nearly the information I needed and it would be terribly bad form. We had to work up to that with a variety of probing questions that allowed her to walk me through her night — what did she eat, where did she sit, what did they talk about, where was he standing when he said goodnight. What did she say and do.

In my mind, I basically had a paint-by-numbers outline of the anecdote, but I had to ask her every question I could so she would provide the paint to fill in and fill out the images.

I also hoped she would surprise me, so my picture had

even more personality and color, like when she described how she stood next to him (on his right) while he sat at a restaurant table, running her hand up and down his back three times.

She recalled almost as an afterthought: “It was the last time I touched him.”

Being a writer means exploring the world around you, and getting first-person anecdotes is an invaluable part of your reporting.

Writing a story on a new hotel project in town? Instead of calling up the neighbor whose house will be dwarfed by a parking garage, go out to his house and see for yourself what is his view now and how will it be affected.

If you are profiling a musician, don’t just ask them what their preshow routine is like. Spend the day — or a few days — going to rehearsal, eating lunch, shopping for clothes, doing soundcheck. Get the dialogue that comes when he or she interacts with someone else.

Suppose we were writing a story about the airlines’ new push to strictly enforce carry-on bag sizes, and we found ourselves at the airport. Taking notice of the different size bags passengers wheeled around the concourse could help with details, as could what exactly happens when you are in line for the flight.

Take note of the United Airlines representative stopping a female traveler with what appears to be an oversized roller bag and asking her to put it in the measurement box situated near the gate. What happens? Does she get on with it or need to check her bag? How does the passenger behave? How about the airline employee?

Listen to both talking about their experience, and even go into interview mode:

1. Identify yourself as a writer working on an article on this topic.
2. Ask the passenger her name and where she is going.
3. How does she feel about the policy?
4. What was she feeling when approached about the bag and while measuring?
5. What were her thoughts when packing the bag (did she realize it would be oversized, etc.)?
6. How does she feel about the push for pay bags?

Notice all of these are “open-ended” questions, meaning they cannot be answered with a “yes,” “no” or single-word answer. We need to get people to describe their feelings, emotions and experiences to bring others into their stories.

Nothing is hypothetical

The one way NOT to get anecdotes is the lazy way: creating your own hypothetical from what you think might happen or from a few stories you may have heard from others.

“Imagine you are walking down the sidewalk and you come across a homeless person seeking change...”

“A mother and daughter are shopping for a prom dress...”

“Bringing home a new puppy and not sure where it should sleep?”

Imagine how much more effective real people with real names could be sharing their real stories.

**‘An Incredible Journey’ with Aaron
Portzline of The Athletic**

Aaron Portzline of The Athletic set out to write a profile on NHL forward Artemi Panarin, who had been extraordinary on the ice but elusive to the media. Here is his anecdotal lede:

The 8-year-old boy stood shaking and scared in the middle of a bus station in Chelyabinsk, Russia, tears gathering in his eyes and dripping off his cheeks. His panicked hands rifled through the same pockets over and over for the bus ticket he could not afford to lose.

At the previous stop, he’d reached into a secret pocket on the inside of his pants — to the left of the zipper, just behind the waist — to buy a snack for the 25-mile trip from Korkino to Chelyabinsk. The ticket must have been left at the counter when he reached for his money.

His grandmother didn’t just put the rubles in that pocket, she sewed that pocket into his jeans, too, hoping robbers wouldn’t find it when they patted him down. This was more than 900 miles east of Moscow and just eight years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Poverty was a permanent cloud in the Chelyabinsk region, and crime was rampant. Even kids weren’t safe.

The boy stood trembling at the world’s mercy. Most mistook him for a 5- or 6-year-old, a golden mop of hair on top of a frail 65-pounder, all ribs and elbows and knees.

Two men emerged from the swirl of legs and luggage. “Where are your parents? Why are you crying? Are you lost?”

They looked around the station for an adult accomplice,

fearing a ruse. One gave the boy the money in exchange for a promise that he'd spend it on a bus ticket. Even kids couldn't be trusted.

The tears dried. A natural smile returned. Deep breaths.

Artemi Panarin remembers this as one of the scariest days of his young life. He bought a new ticket and boarded a bus back home to Korkino, but his remarkable journey from isolation and poverty to NHL stardom and immense wealth was just getting started.

Blue Jackets fans have been treated to numerous Panarin highlights this season — the puck dangling, the passing, the scoring. But few in North America know what Panarin has survived to make it this far, how he emerged from an almost hopeless part of the world to become one of the best hockey players of his generation.

From: [*An Incredible Journey*](#): Artemi Panarin's path from poverty to NHL stardom / *The Athletic*

14.

Writing the Lede

Crafting the doorway into your article

“The difference between the almost right word and the right word is ... the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.”
Mark Twain

The quest for the lede begins as soon as reporting begins, and like a detective, a feature writer is constantly striving to find the best way to bring readers into his or her story.

Steve Rushin of Sports Illustrated recalls a story he did on the [Bass Master Class](#), which he called “the Super Bowl of bass fishing.” Fish were weighed at the Birmingham Convention Center, and all-day anglers would swagger in

wearing NASCAR-style suits and their biggest catch of the day with a sold-out crowd cheering them on.

Outside the convention center stands a statue of legendary college football coach Bear Bryant, arguably Alabama's most famous sports figure — and no one paid any attention to it, including the high school fishing teams outside cheering on the competitors.

“I didn't even know there were high school fishing teams,” Rushin said. “And here is the icon of Bear Bryant in Alabama, representing a sport that dominates the state, being ignored by these high school fishing teams cheering these fish weigh-ins. All week long that image lingered with me, and I knew that was going to be the lede.”

As you do the reporting, you can hear the lede. You can see where the piece is going to start. Somebody might say something that surprises you. How they say it, maybe that's a good place to start. If you attune yourself to it, you can hear ledes.

Unlike a news story, the lede in features is not just the first graph. It might be several paragraphs. It can be several hundred words if they are constructed properly.

I often think about a feature article like a house and the lede is the door we use to get inside.

That means the door has to connect to the house. It should also be ornate enough to be welcoming but not garish enough to repel. When I walk through it, I better feel welcome and have a good idea of where I am heading, or I am just as inclined to go back outside.

A news-writing lede for an inverted pyramid story is often painfully straightforward: who, what, when, where, why and how.

After reading that, I know the facts, but I am not going to care to get into the story nearly as much as I would if I

am drawn in by some personal tale or experience — some character to which I can relate — before learning those six key facts.

A personal anecdote, description, narrative or scenario is more often than not the best way to pull a reader into a story — no matter what the topic.

Consider these examples of different feature ledes:

Descriptive

Moving around the big yellow kitchen lined with stainless steel ovens, prep tables, stacks of King Arthur flour, blocks of Cabot's butter, and bowls piled with chunks of rich, dark, Callebaut chocolate, 43-year-old Vermont chef, farmer and foodie entrepreneur Abbey Duke inhaled the rich buttery smell of holiday cookies cooling on the racks beside her and broke into a smile.

[Cookies for Good!](#), *The Saturday Evening Post*, Nov. 1, 2013

Narration

The beat-up black BMW sputtered to a stop, and Harold Stonier stepped out onto the New Bedford waterfront. The sky was overcast, with gulls wheeling in circles overhead. Their cackling grew to a din as Harold walked through the parking lot, past trucks painted with the name "Tempest Fisheries." A cold breeze, carrying with it the stench of dead fish and brine, blew off the water as he climbed the concrete steps to a rusty, steel-sided building.

The desolate waterfront must have looked perfect to Harold, who was a fan of mob movies and TV shows like "The Sopranos." It must have been exactly the type of place he had in mind when he logged onto Mafia.com to search for a hitman.

The name he'd found was Frank "Bruno" Moniz, a bodybuilder and right-hand man to South Coast mob lord Timothy Mello. Moniz was working as a truck driver at Tempest Fisheries while awaiting trial on charges including racketeering,

drug trafficking and illegal gambling. If Harold had any second thoughts about hiring Moniz, he must have pushed them aside. As he entered the office, the secretary saw a tall, well-dressed man with a boyish face and neatly trimmed hair parted to one side.

"Is Frank here?" Harold asked. The secretary told him no. Harold had come prepared for this. He took a white envelope out of his coat and handed it over. "Just tell Frank this is from Alan Parker and that I'll call him," he said. The secretary dutifully printed on the envelope "Alan Parker. He'll call you," in cramped letters.

"[A Murder Story](#)," by Michael Blanding, Boston Feature, September 2004

Scene Setting

The tantrums were "epic" remembers Brianne DeRosa. The Cranston, Rhode Island, mom admits that her 5-year-old son, Patrick, is still sometimes challenging. But when he was a toddler, he had rage-filled episodes at daycare and couldn't be calmed. The center wanted Patrick to be evaluated for mood disorders, sensory problems, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). DeRosa wasn't convinced. Since his behavior improved over the weekends, she wondered whether the packaged snacks served at daycare could be the culprit.

When she asked for the labels and combed through the ingredients, she kept spotting synthetic food dyes. She asked the teacher to stop giving him the colored snacks, and his tantrums disappeared after a couple of days. "Within a few weeks, it was like nothing was wrong," says DeRosa.

"[The Food Dye Blues](#)," by Sally Kuzemchak, Parents Feature, June 2014

First-person

My husband and I decided to be a one-child family long before our son Oliver was born. With several years of reproductive-

health scares behind me, conceiving a child felt like a Powerball win; I didn't need another chance at the jackpot. Scott thought we could avoid the inevitable slings and arrows of sibling warfare. We both hail from large families, in which continuation of the family name is assured through siblings and cousins. We were content with our decision, and our families took it well, too. A few months after Oliver was born, I bagged up my maternity clothes for a tag sale, and Scott started researching permanent birth-control options.

[Is One Child Enough?](#) by Diana Burrell, Parenting.com

Notice what these ledes are not a summary of the story (like the inverted pyramid), nor are they an introductory paragraph (like an academic paper).

Lucas Sullivan of The Dispatch shared one of the best tips he received about lede writing: “If you were talking about a story like a game you just watched, whatever is the first thing you would tell your friend, spouse, partner, that is your lede.”

“Find what excites you most about the story and tell that,” Sullivan said. “I’ll do that if I don’t know how to find my way into a story. I’ll be like what is the thing that excited me the most. I will write that and then I’ll finish the rest of the feature around it.”

The goal of the feature lede is to pique the reader’s interest, grab their attention, introduce the characters and set the article’s direction.

Part of setting that direction is to ensure that the lede takes us toward the nut graph of the story.

Let’s consider this [lede from Wired Feature](#):

Marathon swimmer Mike Spalding was 10 hours into an epic 33-mile voyage between Maui and the Big Island when his escort boat lost sight of him. Being the middle of the night and all, the captain was forced to fire up his lights to reestablish contact

with the kayaker at Spalding's side. This, ironically enough, is the absolute last resort when you get lost swimming in the darkness. With the kayak's light now blazing as well, the creatures of the nighttime sea began to take notice. Squid amassed around Spalding as he slogged on, forming a slowly moving bait ball. He took a hit from one, and then another and another. After the fourth bump, Spalding felt a sharp pain in his chest.

It was the first bite, albeit just a nibble. The 62-year-old (that's not a typo) Spalding broke for the kayak.

"As I was eggbeatering to get into the kayak with my legs perpendicular to the surface of the water, I felt this sharp hit on my leg," he told WIRED. "It wasn't painful, but it was like you got punched or something. And so I ran my fingers down my calf and I felt this hole.

"It's a big-ass hole."

And see how it takes us to this nut graph:

Spalding had earned the dubious title of first living human confirmed to have been attacked by a cookiecutter shark, which gored a 3-inch-wide crater in his leg. At no more than two feet long, this diminutive terror nevertheless packs a set of teeth that are bigger than any other shark relative to body size, according to George Burgess, an ichthyologist and director of the Florida Program for Shark Research at the Florida Museum of Natural History. It's a glow-in-the-dark evolutionary marvel of the open ocean that takes on beasts hundreds of times its size, including submarines. And it almost always wins.

You have no doubt after reading the lede that the story is taking us in the direction revealed in the nut graph. The story told in the lede shows us clearly where we are heading and how we will get there.

Michael Farber of Sports Illustrated said he started his career with scene ledes — "Here they are in the dressing room or having dinner" — but as he became more

comfortable in the work environment, he realized that sometimes features “start where they start.”

“I [did a piece on Erik Karlsson](#) in 2016, and the piece starts with how the NHL deals with injury and the secrecy around the injury,” he recalled. “It leads to Karlsson not saying exactly what was wrong with him. It just starts where it starts. A scene lede may not be the best place but it’s rarely a bad place to start.”

Listen for the ding

Listening is a key part of interviewing, and one reason for that is to hear the lede and conclusion when they present themselves.

I feel like a virtual bell goes off in my head when I hear my sources provide either the anecdote or quote that will be shaped into the bookend beginning and end of my articles. When I hear the bells, I know to mark those parts with an “L” for lede or “C” for the conclusion.

Conversely, if I don’t hear the dings in my head, I know I need to keep asking questions until I do.

It happened when I was interviewing Columbus (Ohio) [Police Chief Kim Jacobs](#) for a profile when I asked her about when she first thought about becoming a police officer. Notice this is a different question than “How did you become a police officer.” Turns out she was sitting with her family in a Pizza Hut when a police officer walked by and noticed how athletic she was (Jacobs was a college track star), and asked her point-blank, “Have you ever thought of becoming a police officer?”

As soon as I heard her say it, I knew I needed that anecdote for my lede.

Conversely, when I wrote about the rise of home births, I knew I wanted my lede to be what it was like for a woman having a birth at home, so I had to get as clear a description as a family feature would print.

In that case, I knew the anecdote I needed; I just needed to ask the questions that would pull it out.

After interviewing one couple, I had great material, but I still couldn't see it, so I asked them to "walk me through it," by visiting their bedroom and sharing the experience with them — after the fact.

Here is what we came up with:

The avocado-colored walls of Erin and Ben Johnson's Clintonville bedroom provide a soothing backdrop for the couple's queen-size bed. It rests on a fluffy white rug in front of a south-facing window bank. On a lazy summer afternoon, it appears the perfect spot for reading while sipping ice tea under the slowly circulating ceiling fan, or even drifting off for a nap before dinner.

But for Erin Johnson, it was the perfect place to have her baby.

Johnson was neither caught off guard by rapid labor nor trapped by a snowstorm. The birth of her son, August, went exactly as planned using the latest (controversial) trend to sweep the childbirth industry throughout the country and in Greater Columbus — a pre-arranged home birth.

A self-proclaimed homebody, Johnson never had been to a hospital and isn't particularly fond of doctors — two reasons that led her to consider giving birth in her house. It was a decision her husband, Ben, deputy director of communications at the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, fully supported.

“It seemed like the most natural choice in all the research I did,” she says. “I’m a personal trainer. My background is in science. The more I read about natural birth and how things happen, the more I realized unnecessary intervention in a hospital setting happens more than it needs to. But our bodies are capable of this. They have been doing it for thousands and thousands of years.”

Johnson admits she hedged her bet. She continued to visit an obstetrician simultaneous to her meetings with midwives at CHOICE — the Center for Humane Options in Childbirth Experiences, an organization in Worthington that assists with many of Central Ohio’s home births.

Whether to birth at home was a “game-time decision,” she says. “Using the midwives was my first choice. But I also knew if something went wrong ... I could get to the hospital and call the doctor and say, ‘Hey, I’m here.’ ”

While most women pack a hospital bag around the 37th week of pregnancy that includes comfortable clothes, a toothbrush and family photos, the Johnsons instead prepared a birthing box they stored in the basement, which included super-absorbent Chux pads, sheets they didn’t mind throwing away and a bowl to catch the placenta.

Erin awoke at 3:30 am on July 22, 2010, with her first contractions, although they were manageable enough for her to handle a few personal training clients that morning at Move Your Mind in Upper Arlington. By 11 am, things were serious enough to head home.

Her water broke at 1 pm while she was lying on her bed, and she labored alone in the shower until Ben and the midwives arrived about a half-hour later. They took one look at her, Ben recalls, and said, “It’s time to set up!”

“It wasn’t necessarily painful,” Erin says. “I think they just heard the rise and fall of my moans.”

By the time Ben had changed out of his work clothes and gathered the supplies, Erin was dried off and in full-blown labor.

August Dylan was born at 2:56 pm, weighing 10 pounds and measuring 21 inches.

Ledes to Avoid

Direct Address

What is it: Talks directly to the reader, using “you” and starting with a verb of command.

Example: You are walking down the street, trying to decide where to eat when suddenly the smell of fresh-baked bread catches your senses.

The problem: This is a lazy way to try and manufacture an anecdotal feel, but it is not an anecdote. There is also no guarantee that readers feel as you do, and it’s a quick way to alienate them before the article has even begun.

Quote

What is it: You use a quote from a source, or even worse a Bartlett’s famous quotation, to start the story.

Example: “The times they are a-changing,” wrote Bob Dylan, and that is certainly the truth on High Street, just north of campus.

The problem: At best, this is cliché. At worst, you are using your best quotes before you have even pulled readers into the story. Besides, quotes are intended to support facts. You haven’t presented any facts yet to support.

Question

What is it: Asks readers a question in the hopes of engaging them to find out the answer.

Example: What do a college freshman and a new puppy have in common?

The problem: Readers want answers, not questions. And you are either asking readers a question to which they know the answer (so they are already bored) or one for which they do not have the answer (so they feel stupid). Neither circumstance can benefit you as the writer.

Finding the Lede

The anecdotes needed for your lede — and your body — come in your interviews, and that means you must ask questions that pull out the information you need.

15.

Crafting the Nut

*Identifying what your story is about—in a
nutshell*

*“First, find out what your hero wants, then
just follow him.”
Ray Bradbury*

While news structure uses the lede of the inverted pyramid to show readers the main focus of the story, features have a new way of presenting the fulcrum of an article—the central focus that tells readers, “This is what the story will be about.”

We call it the nut graph.

It is the point of the story “in a nutshell” and its goal is to tell the reader what the story is about. It contains

the who, what, when, where, why and how, as well as the feature or value — is it timely, tug at human interest, have proximity to the reader, etc. The nut tells us why this article is for these readers in this publication at this time. Admittedly, it is a lot of work for something that is usually (and often most effectively) a single paragraph, and that is why crafting it well is crucial to an article's success.

It is from the [nut graph](#) that the entire story gets its structure and shape, and the key elements represented in the nut graph should be in evidence throughout the body.

Conversely, if you have not set out a specific idea in your nut graph, it should not appear in the body. And if it does, you need to think about rewriting your nut graph.

“It’s easy to overwrite the feature,” Melissa Hoppert of the New York Times said. “You get caught up in the moment and use big, sweeping words. You have to rein yourself in. You don’t want to be so simple that you can’t put someone in the scene and story, but it’s a balancing act. You can be so observant and write down everything but miss the conversation, and you can’t be so caught up in the interview that you don’t really see the experience. Listen to what they say but write down the scene and the colors. Make sure to ask enough to ask questions.”

The style and structure of the nut graph are fairly simple:

- One paragraph of one or two sentences.
- It comes after the lede and the lede must take us toward the body.
- Contains the main facts: who, what, when, where, why and how.

Consider this story pitched to the Ohio State Alumni

magazine about Dr. Brian Scansen, a vet at the Ohio State University Veterinary Medical Center who is using human medical techniques to treat animals in a program called Interventional Medicine. The goal is to reduce invasive procedures and improve quality of life.

When I finally wrote the story, [“Big Dog, New Tricks,”](#) here was the nut graph:

The patient in this surgery was Maxwell, a 5-year-old Bullmastiff, and he was just one of the numerous animals to benefit from the Interventional Medicine program at the Ohio State University Veterinary Medical Center. Led by Dr. Brian Scansen, the program utilizes the latest techniques from human medicine to provide minimally invasive procedures for animal patients suffering medical issues that involve the heart, lungs, vascular and urologic systems, and cancer.

Notice how it provides the key facts:

- Who (Ohio State Veterinary Medical Center)
- What (offers interventional medicine)
- How (utilizes the latest techniques from human medicine on animals)
- Why (provide minimally invasive procedures)
- The when is implied as now
- The where is the same as the who.

One of the biggest challenges is crafting a lede that takes us to the nut graph.

Consider this example from a writing class.

The story idea was about why Chinese students often adopt American names when they come to study in the United States. The first draft of the article came in like this:

Lede: Wenxin Xia, was sitting in kindergarten beginning to

learn English for the first time when her teacher randomly assigned her the name Sally.

Nut graph: *Many international students at Ohio State use English names while studying abroad in the United States. Xia, a fourth-year journalism major. . .*

Can you spot the challenge?

Sally got the name in a kindergarten class, not college. And we don't see her selecting her name; we see it being assigned.

On revision, we looked to focus on the facts we knew that would take us to the nut graph we sought.

Lede: *When Sally Xia first introduces herself, she is often greeted with a quizzical look.*

Xia, a native of China, knows her Americanized first name can throw others for a loop, but it is a whole lot easier to say than her real first name of Wenxin (pronounced wen-sheen).

Nut graph: *Xia is one of many Chinese students who have adopted European-style names while studying in the United States. Many say it makes communication with native-born classmates easier while they manage to maintain their Chinese culture.*

Xia, who was first dubbed Sally in her Chinese English language class in kindergarten, said the name has made her feel more accepted.

16.

Body Building

Making your story come to life

“The secret to being a writer is that you have to write. It’s not enough to think about writing or to study literature or plan a future life as an author. You really have to lock yourself away, alone, and get to work.”
Augusten Burroughs

If you have gathered enough information and have a strong enough nut graph, the body of the article is the easiest part to write, as the whole goal of your body is to prove the nut graph of the article to be true.

I wrote a story about Columbus, Ohio, school board member who had seven unsuccessful attempts to join the city school board, and was finally elected through the

ineptitude of other candidates (they failed to get enough signatures). He was a high school dropout who wore Hawaiian shirts, was missing most of his teeth and had a braided plait midway down his back (all of which I showed in the lede). The [nut graph of the article](#) was this:

Now two years later it would seem easy to dismiss Wiles as an accidental school board member who is only around until a more qualified candidate comes around during the next election. But a funny thing happened during his stint at the board table: The ultimate outsider is starting to earn some respect, aligning himself with Stephanie Groce, the board's strongest critic of the district administration. And with Groce not seeking reelection this November, Wiles most likely will take over as the public voice of dissent on the board.

The responsibility of the body became to show the reader Wiles' personal path to get where he is today. It must truly address three main questions:

1. What is happening now?
2. How did we get where we are?
3. What will happen next?

For this story, some key areas tracked by the body include:

1. How Wiles ended up a dropout and yet got immersed in public education.
2. Showing what exactly makes him such an outsider.
3. Showing the efforts he has taken to get on the board.
4. Showing what has he done now that he is on the board.
5. Describing where he expects to go next.

To support the nut graph, the body must begin where the story begins, and the direction and content depend on the goals of the story.

For a profile, we start where the subject story begins, and where his or her experiences begin to support the nut graph.

For a general interest piece or [coverage of an event](#), we make sure the reader knows where the story begins by providing some historical perspective and then let the sources take us through the experience with their anecdotes.

“There can be an inclination to when you don’t have a lot of experience with it to throw everything into the story,” Misti Crane of Ohio State research said. “When I became a more careful feature writer, I realized I needed to identify the kind of details that were important and that brought meaning to the story and to leave the rest in my notebook. If you are trying to paint a picture of the ocean, you don’t also put the forest in just because you know what the forest looks like.”

When crafting the body, remember that the broad borders of the feature writing hourglass give you the latitude to explore all facets of the story and incorporate tons of sources, examples and anecdotes.

But everything they say has to somehow be reflected in the single nut graph paragraph.

Show Don't Tell

The three words for a feature writer to live by are “Show, Don't Tell.”

You can tell the reader the weather is “hot,” but they will fill in what that means from their own experience unless you show them exactly what you mean.

Adjectives, or “telling,” are a sign of lazy writing.

Instead, describe sensations, emotions and scenes so we can see it for ourselves.

“I think about the way documentaries describe things, the way books describe things,” Mitch Hooper of (614) Magazine said. “That's kind of what we want to be doing it, too.

“If you are in a room and the walls are white, we can say that, but what kind of white? What does it feel like? What impact do the white walls have?”

Imagine you are describing a dog to someone who does not have sight. If I said he has was a tan Lab mix with four legs and a fluffy tail, with brown eyes, floppy ears and chubby cheeks, do you think they would know exactly what he looks like?

Is he fat or thin? What is fat or thin exactly?

Is he tan like khaki? All one color?

Does his tail curl or go straight out?

Are his eyes brown like chocolate milk or semisweet chips, or like a mahogany desk?

Show, don't tell.

Is this the dog you saw? I hope so; it's my puppy, Tanner!



Tanner Kraft

Transition

If the nut graph is the “so what” part of your article, telling readers what the piece is about, transitions tell them how to navigate from one idea to the next in a logical and flowing way.

Without them, your article is choppy and disjointed, and feels like there are just a bunch of facts or anecdotes plopped on top of each other.

Good article organization has to show the relationships constructed between the parts.

Some often-used transition words include “first,” “however,” “furthermore” while repeating words and phrases is also an effective way to link and transition:

Let’s check out this article [written for Columbus CEO](#):

“Natalie always keeps the business and the business goals in mind, and makes sure it’s something practical people can walk away from and use. ... She makes it work in terms of results.”

Crede, a Chicago native, learned practicality while studying human relations at St. Petersburg College in Florida, where she took a job as a personnel clerk for a small company selling products over the radio. That business, the Home Shopping Network, quickly exploded, and Crede spent the next decade keeping up with its expanding needs.

See how using the root word, “practical” from the quote ties it to the next paragraph?

Esquire excerpted Mark Herzlich’s book, [What It Takes: Fighting For My Life and My Love of the Game](#), in its June 9 issue, and included these paragraphs:

Four doctors in white lab coats came into the small exam room. I didn’t know what was happening, but I knew four doctors couldn’t be good. One of them took two MRI results and jammed them in the top of the lightbox, then turned it on. Images of the two longest bones in my body — my left femur, or thighbone, and my right femur — were lit up. But the two bones looked completely different. It was as if they came from different bodies or even different species. I knew that couldn’t be good, either.

The doctor got right to it. He explained that I almost certainly had an extremely rare disease that affects fewer than two out of every million people in the world. Only two hundred and fifty or so cases of the disease are reported each year. Depending on further tests, my chances of surviving the disease could be as low as ten percent.

NICOLE KRAFT

You can see how the use of similar words tie us to the ideas that come first and next.

17.

Writing to the End

Helping the reader complete the journey

*“If you want to change the world, pick up
your pen and write.”
Martin Luther*

For most writers, the ending is easy.

News writers end an inverted pyramid story when they run out of information.

Academic writers end their articles with a conclusion that wraps up the main focus of the piece.

For feature writers, the ending is anything but easy, as some would argue it is the most important part of the piece.

“The ending is your final chance to nail the point of

the story to the readers so it will echo there for years,” writer Bruce DaSilva wrote in [“Telling True Stories: A nonfiction writer’s guide from the Nieman Foundation.”](#)

Simplistically, the ending signifies to the reader that the story is done. But more than that, it needs to let the reader feel fulfilled like they have completed a journey with you, and they sigh with satisfaction.

It needs to leave the reader with something that resonates and clings to the edge of their mind after the page has been turned, and that can be a tie back to the lede, a reflective moment or a twisting surprise.

Many of the best endings tie back to something reflected in the lede, like this example from [Esquire on Jon Stewart:](#)

Lede: They gather under the tall Jon Stewart. They gather under the Jon Stewart who takes up the whole side of a building on Eleventh Avenue in Manhattan and is about three stories high. They gather under the Jon Stewart who has his hands clasped, his chin lifted, his eyes narrowed, his lips drawn in a tight line. They gather under the Jon Stewart who is professionally skeptical and won’t take any bullshit. They gather under the Jon Stewart who is imitating a self-serious news anchor and who, while imitating a self-serious news anchor, has this message: “For Larry Flynt’s Hustler Club, go one block down and take a right.” They gather under the Jon Stewart who is funny and who, with his dark backswept hair set off by graying temples, is a few years younger than the Jon Stewart of today.

Conclusion: Jon Stewart has made a career of avoiding “Whooo” humor. He has flattered the prejudices of his audience, but he has always been funny, and he has always made them laugh. At the Juan Williams taping, however, at least half of Stewart’s jokes elicited the sound of Whooo! instead of the sound of laughter. He’s been able to concentrate his comedy into a kind of shorthand — a pause, or a raised eyebrow, is often all

that is necessary now — but a stranger not cued to laugh could be forgiven for not laughing, indeed for thinking that what was going on in front of him was not comedy at all but rather high-toned journalism with a sense of humor. Which might be how Jon Stewart wants it by now. But outside the building, there's still a giant version of him standing with clasped hands, and he looks ready to take the piss out of anyone, including the gray-haired man inside, talking seriously to a Fox News analyst about starting a network something like Fox, without the laughs.

The ending of your article, much like the lede, often reveals itself in the course of your interviewing. For the lede you are listening to moments a source shares that can best pull your readers into the nut graph, but with the conclusion, you want the moment that the story comes to a resolution or a lesson is learned, or experience is completed.

The goal, however, is not to wrap the story up in the conventional sense. We need the reader to feel like they have come full circle like you have finished telling a story over a cup of coffee, and at the end, they set that mug down, sit back in their chair and go, “Wow.”

A popular and often effective ending device is to use a quote from one of your most significant sources. It means giving a source the last word, which some writers don't support.

Sometimes, however, they say it best, like this article, [“Art of the Steal: On the Trail of World's Most Ingenious Thief”](#) (Wired)”

Conclusion: *The judge had a similar thought during Blanchard's plea hearing. The banks “should hire him and pay him a million dollars a year,” he said. And right before sentencing, the judge turned directly to Blanchard.*

“I think that you have a great future ahead of you if you wish

NICOLE KRAFT

to pursue an honest style of life,” he said. “Although I’m not prepared to sign a letter of reference.”

18.

The Touch Test

Making sure the pieces fit together

*“If I waited for perfection, I would never
write a word.”
Margaret Atwood*

As we have mentioned, the nut graph is the touchstone for every other paragraph in the body. If you have a strong nut graph that is supported by the body, you will find evidence of that nut in every single paragraph you read in the article.

To test this theory, close your eyes and stick out your index finger.

Now put it down on a random paragraph in your article.

Do you see evidence of the nut graph? Do it a few more times. Still seeing the nut graph?

If you see evidence of the nut everywhere you touch, great! You have a strong nut graph and body.

If you see it in most places but not all, you may need to edit, refine or delete those paragraphs.

If you rarely find it but all your paragraphs seem tied to each other, you may need to change the nut graph.

If your paragraphs are not connected and you can't find your nut graph, it's time to take a long, hard look at your article.

Alumni Example

Here is a story from the Ohio State Alumni Magazine about the Security and Intelligence major offered through the Department of International Studies. They were revisiting the major, established in 2015, because of the renewed look at national security after the Boston Marathon bombing on April 15, 2013.

Here is the lede and nut graph:

Lede: In the months after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, thousands of Americans sought to heal themselves and serve their wounded nation by joining the military and intelligence branches that protect the home shores.

At Ohio State, one such seed of patriotism grew, by 2005, into the Security and Intelligence major offered through the Department of International Studies. Its goal: to create and educate the next generation of security-minded citizens within the framework of a liberal arts education.

Nut graph: Eight years later, America is once again bruised from violence at the Boston Marathon — but it is far from broken. And the Security and Intelligence major is still going strong, with expanding offerings to confront the ever-changing ways our national and individual security may be compromised.

The major concepts in the nut graph relate to:

1. America being impacted by terrorism
2. The major itself
3. Why it's offered and what students might gain from it.

Here are the remaining 12 paragraphs from the body. Do they all relate back to those ideas? Try the finger test.

1. *“After 9/11, it became apparent there was a demand among students for this kind of course work — based on patriotism — to help the country and to get a job,” said International Studies Director Anthony Mughan. “The challenge was creating a major that had high academic integrity and at the same time stronger vocational content than a lot of social science majors.”*
2. *The program Mughan and his team developed focuses on understanding the components of terrorism, which he defined as “violence against citizens for political ends.” Those components include recognizing threats to national security and how governments work to counter those threats.*
3. *The most noteworthy threat is a conventional war, Mughan said, adding that course work includes much about war’s history, economics and intelligence. Other topics provide an ever more comprehensive view of world security, including bioterrorism, organized crime, food security, cybersecurity, transportation, and even the basic concepts of job and personal security.*
4. *“Security means many different things to different people,” Mughan, a Liverpool native, said. “Yes, there is terrorism, but immigration is also a matter of security. How about water security? The Middle East*

- is all about water.”*
5. *“We are not just protecting ourselves from guns and terrorists. We focus on security in an increasingly insecure world.”*
 6. *Senior lecturer Jeffrey Lewis, Ph.D., who helped establish the major, said at least 10 percent of the students have some connection to the military, as a veteran, reservist or member of ROTC, and the vast majority of students in the major view it as a means to a career.*
 7. *That co-mingling of the military-minded and “regular undergraduates” help both sides see the issues clearer, said Lewis.*
 8. *“Terrorism by nature is prone to exaggeration and hysteria,” said Lewis, who last year published the book “The Business of Martyrdom: A History of Suicide Bombing.” “It is a public service to educate students, so people who are working in the field approach it in a disciplined and informed manner.”*
 9. *Mughan said one of the most appealing aspects of the major is its interdisciplinary structure, with programs like Communication, Anthropology, Political Science, Sociology, History, Earth Sciences and Geography all contributing courses. The specific selections make it more vocationally focused, making the sum greater than its parts when it comes to a post-graduate job search, Mughan said.*
 10. *To even better serve that search, the major in 2012 began mandating a language minor, including French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Russian, Somali, Spanish or Swahili, with “critical” languages like Arabic, Chinese and Farsi strongly encouraged.*
 11. *Mughan said he hopes to offer a professional master’s*

degree in Security and Intelligence within the next three years, but his more immediate goal is to improve the curriculum so it continues to produce the next generation of security experts to serve a frightening, but ever-growing, need.

12. *“Americans think everyone wants to be American,” Mughan said. “That is part of the myth of the Great Society. But we are now seeing foreign-born [people] perpetrate terrorist acts on American soil. That is a new reality that runs counter to deeply held cultural myths. We have to be ready for that.”*

Use the hourglass as a guide to ensure your anecdotal lede gets you to the nut graph and your body flows exclusively from that nut graph, before coming to rest.

Details, Details

It’s the details that make the story. The detail illuminates the subject. They are what tells you something. Whether it’s a physical description or a place, then the details show what makes it worthwhile. It advances the characterization.

Think about if it’s quirky enough that it’s worth noting. Is it significant that Mr. Jones is wearing a red tie? Probably not unless he is trying to dress like Donald Trump. In that case, the tie hanging below the belt might be more significant.

Consider if you are illuminating your subject or are you just cluttering up your. Students need to self-edit. Take a machete to it. You do not want to slow the reader down.

One trick is dialogue. Try writing the back and forth

between subjects — people like it. Showing the way they speak is the way to change the pace of the story.

Open your eyes.

Everybody has one great story they tell at a party. There is one cool thing that has happened to everybody. Make sure your eyes are open and thinking about what people can tell you. Being observant will help you see stories others may not.

“Tim Layden did a piece on the [40th anniversary of a football team](#) and they had a player who kicked a 28-yard winning field goal,” Michael Farber of Sports Illustrated said. “I called him up and asked was it a straight-on or soccer-style kick. This was in the 1970s, so it got me thinking: Who was the last straight-on kicker who made his mark mostly in the NFL. One sentence got me thinking about things. What makes you curious? What do you want to know more about?”

19.

Spotlight on: Ted Conover

Learning to immerse

Journalism education teaches a formal way of learning things, which when it comes to living people, involves the interview, hopefully in person.

A formal Q&A is really important for lots of kinds of journalism. For other kinds, you can get somewhere by thinking of this encounter, not as a news-gathering expedition but a personal experience — something you are going to appreciate at multiple levels.

It's not just asking questions and writing down the answer. It's making yourself fully present.

This is immersion writing.

In an interview, you can notice a football player seems stiff or tired. You can notice a fast-food worker is wary. But putting yourself in the article as a participant or as using a fly-on-the-wall perspective can bring writing to life in a

way that makes the reader feel and live the experience with you.



Ted Conover

Ted Conover is one of the world's best-known participatory journalist and has written books on riding the rails as a "hobo" in "Rolling Nowhere" (1984), living and working among Mexican migrants in "Coyotes" (1987), chronicling Aspen's celebrity culture as a local cab driver and reporter at the Aspen Times in "Whiteout" (1991), and documenting what it's like to be a guard at Sing Sing prison in "Newjack" (2000).

In his book, [Immersion: A Writer's Guide to Going Deep](#), he talks about gaining access, turning the experience into a story, undercover reporting, and the ethical issues around this type of long-form nonfiction.

Nicole Kraft sat down with Conover, a legend in immersive writing experience to get his take on the practice and how journalism students can make it part of their writing repertoire.

My idea with immersion writing is to try and move beyond the formal roles of being either a questioner or an answerer. Get into a place where you are getting to know somebody.

Ask "Can we go back to X," and this time I'm going to go back to what they are telling me. It takes more time.

To get to know somebody is a different thing than

asking them questions. The product also can be different. If you are simply asking questions, you are preparing for a news story. Having a conversation, paying attention to the room, and opening up all your senses. Now you are preparing to write a feature.

More and more features are first-person. Describing a place or a situation, sharing with a person you are writing about. Be with a policewoman at the doughnut shop on her five-minute break. That scene is interesting to write about. It's more than a quote. Be with a person at a moment of their life. It's a more nuanced and humankind of reporting than classical just-the-facts interviewing.

Trying to make a connection with someone, capturing them in higher definition. There is more to people than the fact that they are a quarterback, or a record holder, or a felon.

I got involved in immersion because I wanted to write about the experiences I've had — whether it be crossing the country on my bicycle or working in a factory in Spain. I liked writing and I liked the idea that some of those skills could be used to write about my own experiences. Historically, our own experiences have not qualified as journalism. They have been memoirs or personal essays. In articles and books I've written, I thought about how I could use my personal experience as journalism. If I could only find an experience that matters as news.

So I got a job as a [corrections officer at Sing Sing](#). Prisons were in the news and they were hard to learn about from the perspective of a staff member.”

Quotes

A good exercise in capturing dialogue is to record some of it and transcribe that and see what it looks like on the page. Often it does not resemble the kind we read in

fiction or nonfiction books. With all speech, we tend to clean it up even when we are reporting it. In a press conference, a police chief will be saying something ungrammatical and we fix it. This is not always a literal exercise.

There are decisions that have to be made when you are putting speech on the page.

The journalistic standard is, if I have a quotation in an article, I can also find it in my notes or playback part of the recording. If I am rendering a conversation between me and a prisoner, as part of my work on the job, I may not be able to take notes about it.

That said, 95 percent of what a conversation might be is not something you want to take notes on anyway. It's mundane, normal or boring. Taking notes in that situation, depending on what was being discussed, may not be useful.

If I thought there was something, I'd record the quote in my mind. Then I'd get out of sight as quickly as possible to write it down. Often exchanges were very brief, so I could do that.

I was in the visiting room at Sing Sing, and I remember being moved by the sight of tough prisoners who tried to scare me all day being hugged by little kids and kissed by their wives, being revealed to be a different person.

I said to a guard with me, "Doesn't it get to you seeing guys with their families." And he said, "It's a regular hallmark card." I liked that because it was funny. He's not sentimental. He was saving that for somebody else.

It was super easy to remember — "It's a regular hallmark card." If you work at it you can remember longer things. Be absolutely the best recorder you can be.

Journalism is changing fast. Be open to the possibilities.

There are situations where immersion can be about getting out of your comfort zone.

A lot of students are not very confident in talking with strangers. This is a whole profession around talking to strangers. You have to be willing to ask a question of someone you don't know and act like you have every right to ask a question and you deserve the answer.

Act like it's the most natural thing. People are looking for cues when a stranger approaches. If you are confident and expect answers, it increases the chance you will get one. Walk into a room with your tail wagging.

SECTION IV

REVISING AND
BEING READ

20.

To See Again

The art of revision

“When your story is ready for rewrite, cut it to the bone. Get rid of every ounce of excess fat. This is going to hurt; revising a story down to the bare essentials is always a little like murdering children, but it must be.

Stephen King

In French, “revision” means to see again, and that is exactly what we hope to do with every article after it has been completed, but before it has been submitted to an editor.

We aim to take a fresh, critical perspective on the piece — to tighten it, reorganize, fill in weak spots and catch anything that might be missing.

This is editing, as opposed to proofreading, although we will be going over word by word, line by line, to make sure we have spelled everything correctly — especially names, titles, proper nouns, etc.

This might be even more challenging than your original writing, because everything you have written is some precious little gem to you, your baby. But as Stephen King wrote in [“On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft,”](#) “Kill your darlings, kill your darlings, even when it breaks your egocentric little scribbler’s heart, kill your darlings.”

When and how to revise is personal to each writer, and the process may change over time and with more experiences.

Gaming journalist [Jason Schreier](#) said he likes to edit as he goes, polishing his material on the page as he goes, instead of just first getting a full draft done, but he admits it may not work for everyone.



Jason Schreier

“I think people should just do what works best for them because some people can just get fixated on a single sentence and that can be a really bad technique if you are one of those types of people,” he said.

Melissa Hoppert acknowledges she is one of those people. When she started in journalism, Hoppert was a copy editor, which prompted her to tweak her writing as she went with a copy editor’s eye.

As she got more comfortable writing, she worked longer and longer before starting to revise.

“I try to get about a third of the way through before I start editing,” she said. “Or when I get stuck, I reread and tweak it, and keep going. I basically edit in thirds and at the end, I reread it one more time and then I revise.”

Many writers believe revision requires a “cooling off” period, which means my students’ common practice of writing up until the moment something is due is rarely the best approach. Instead, give yourself an artificial deadline so you can put it aside and come back with fresh eyes.

“In a daily newspaper situation that break may be again is just get up and go walk around the building or go grab a cup of coffee or whatever,” Misti Crane said. “Then come back, print it out and review it. I know that that seems sort of old-fashioned but there is something about printing out what you have written and taking a pen and making notes as you go through, rather than getting sucked back into rewriting while you are at your desk with the computer, that I have found beneficial.”

Among the changes Crane is looking to make — cutting, cutting and more cutting. That includes cutting out words that do not contribute to the real meaning of the story and entire paragraphs that may seem redundant or unnecessary.

“It may mean getting rid of some things you really enjoyed experiencing, but you have to be in the service of your reader rather than in the service of yourself as a writer,” she said.

Some questions to ask amid the macro view of revision:

- Are you pulled in by the lede?
- Can you find the nut graph?

- Does the nut graph hold up in the body?
- Is your article balanced?
- Do you smoothly transition throughout the body?
- Do you have enough sources? Too many?
- Are the quotes advancing the story or should you paraphrase more?
- Are you showing or telling?
- Is your conclusion ending with a sigh or is it just flopping?
- How is your sentence variety? Is it keeping readers engaged or lulling them to sleep?

In this exercise, you truly are the article's first reader, so notice if there are spots you skip over, or you simply want to stop reading. If you are bored, the reader will be, too.

Look for places you are stumbling or it's confusing. It helps often to read out loud since you won't be able to skip over any words or phrases like you can with silent reading. If it does not sound right to your ear, that's an area to mark for rewriting.

"Some of the worst moments are when you have a brilliant quote, but you just can't fit it into the story and you cut it out," Alison Lukan of *The Athletic* said. "Or you have a brilliant little piece but it really adds nothing to the story.

Zack Meisel of *The Athletic* admits that as a younger writer he was "over-the-top wordy." He later realized that to serve the reader he needed to put down the thesaurus and write what feels natural.

"It's such a turn-off to have these big words that nobody knows what they mean or just unnecessary or too much describing and you're not actually getting to the root of

what's happening," he said. "I think you just learn over time, you just want to avoid that because it's secondary to what you're actually writing about.

"Your writing is supposed to make the story easier to read, it's supposed to make the story come to life but it's not supposed to overshadow a story. What is most important is still what you're actually writing about, not the words necessarily that you're using to describe what happened."

Mitch Hooper of (614) Magazine said he is helped in revision by reminding himself that his article does not actually represent him, but instead represents the subject.

"At a certain point, the story is not about you even though you were a part of the process of putting the story together," he said. "You have to understand who your story is for; it's not for you it's for the audience, it's for the subjects, it's for the people involved in this stuff. You have to turn off how much you love your own stories. You have to fall on your own sword, you're not perfect."

In the micro view, start looking at your grammar and word choices.

- Are you ending sentences with prepositions?
- Is your style consistent throughout?
- Are you using enough clichés to sink a battleship?
- Are you overusing adjectives and adverbs?
- Are you properly using the language relevant to this publication or audience?
- How are your tenses and agreements with pronouns?
- Are you using proper punctuation (and avoiding exclamation points!)?

Read Aloud Time with Lucas Sullivan

“I am sure we all look foolish those of us who do this, but I read my articles out loud because when you force yourself to read it out loud you realize shortcuts your brain was making as well as actual punctuation.”

21.

Editors

*'Just write the damn thing. A second draft can
make it better.'*

“Substitute ‘damn’ every time you’re
inclined to write ‘very;’ your editor will
delete it and the writing will be just as it
should be.”
Mark Twain

When I started writing I remember thinking that getting limited or no feedback from my editor was the goal, but I later realized writing growth comes in the reverse. It’s a theme common among the most successful writers.

“When you first start you think you know everything,” Hoppert agreed. “I definitely have changed in that way.

You have to trust in your editor and that they know what they are doing. Their job is to be the reader and read as a reader would read it, and to make it easier for the reader. You can't sweat the small stuff. Put the piece in and let it go. After I file the story, I walk away from it. It belongs to the editor now."

Seeking and getting feedback on your writing even before the deadline from those who see and massage a lot of copy can help with the writing process as well as the end result.

"You can't take it personally, even though it feels like it," Lukan said. "If there are substantial rewrites, take that as an opportunity to learn what you could have done differently. Maybe you don't change anything next time and you think your editor is full of crap, but just taking the time to learn their perspective will only make your writing better in the future."

Abby Vesoulis went straight from working for the Ohio State Lantern to an internship at Time magazine and parlayed that into a full-time job. She recognizes how significant Time editors have been to her growth as a writer.

"I'm really lucky where I have editors who like that you come to the table with 1,000-2,000 words more than you need because then they can help you decide what's important and what's not important," Vesoulis said. "I always make suggested cuts but a lot of times they say 'No I think we should keep this, let's cut this other part.'"

Adam Jardy recalled that editor involvement in the early revision process for an extensive story on [college football recruiting](#) helped him see the story in a light often dimmed by his proximity to the story.

"When you become the expert on a specific topic, you

can get a little too focused on the forest for the trees,” he said. “It helps sometimes to just have another set of eyes on it. It also helps sometimes to write and then come back to it a few hours later and give yourself a chance to just distance yourself from it for a little bit. You go back and maybe you thought you were really clever with this paragraph and then you back and you’re like, ‘Man, I sound like an idiot.’ Those things happen frequently so as long as you have the time, doing things like that can be really beneficial.”

That does not mean, however, that it’s always a positive experience to have work cut or changed, and discussing changes with an editor; even advocating to reverse cuts you strongly oppose can be a good exercise. The key is to make a strong and logical argument that comes from the perspective of the reader, not the writer. And be sure to pick your fights well.

Hoppert recalled [profiling the owners](#) of 2014 Kentucky Derby winner California Chrome, the first horse they had ever bred and raced. The couple was racing outsiders and the wife told Hoppert she had obtained her Derby outfit not at a boutique but rather at a Cracker Barrel.

“It was the perfect juxtaposition that they were not Kentucky bluebloods,” she said. “If they would have edited out the Cracker Barrel, I’d have been upset and I would have fought for it. If I argue over every word change or comma placement I am not going to make any friends. Then you can’t argue the big stuff.”

Here is an example of how a revision schedule worked in a package I wrote of eight mini-features, coming in at about 5,000 words.

1. Wrote all of the profiles and put them in a

working folder.

2. Put them all away for a week.
3. On the seventh day, I opened the first one and reworked it, taking a macro view, until I was relatively satisfied.
4. Completed that same process with all of them over the next three days.
5. Reread all of them out loud and continued revising sticky areas.
6. Reread all of them and started on a micro view of checking the details.
7. Printed them out and went through them line by line to find any problems (punctuation, misspelling, capitalization).
8. Triple-checked every proper noun, every title, every company name and the spelling of every source name.
9. Turned them in a week before the deadline.

I am sure my editor will have questions and additional revision will take place based on her opinions and desires, but the goal here is to turn in the best, most complete and most accurate story you can.

“The biggest leap is going from nothing to something,” Steve Rushin of Sports Illustrated said. “Just write the damn thing. A second draft can make it better.”

22.

Is it Ethical?

'It's nerve-wracking, it's stressful, but it's also so rewarding in the end.'

**"A word after a word after a word is power."
Margaret Atwood**

The ethics of journalism seem simple and straightforward.

If we follow the [Code of Ethics](#) established by the Society of Professional Journalists, we report under these parameters:

Seek Truth and Report It: Ethical journalism should be accurate and fair. Journalists should be honest and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.

Minimize Harm: Ethical journalism treats sources, subjects,

colleagues and members of the public as human beings deserving of respect.

Act Independently: The highest and primary obligation of ethical journalism is to serve the public.

Be Accountable and Transparent: Ethical journalism means taking responsibility for one's work and explaining one's decisions to the public.

But there are other guidelines for us to follow as ethical feature reporters, as are offered by some of our expert writers.

Misti Crane on setting boundaries

“One pitfall of being not completely ethical is that is you change the outcome for the story.

“If you are too heavily involved in someone's life as you are going through an experience with them, the things you choose to do can change the actual story.

“My ethics are such that I am not a friend of someone I am writing about. Now I am friends now with people I once wrote. While I was writing about them, though, I was always careful to not get too close.

“If we shared a meal together, it was because of the circumstances. I was taking notes, it was part of the story. I wasn't going out to dinner or having a beer with someone I was writing about unless there was a journalism reason for me that.

“Setting those healthy boundaries I think is good. That is also good because if you are going to write a really kick-ass feature, especially a long-form narrative or a series about somebody, you are inevitably going to write something that they would maybe have second thoughts about, or if they edited it they would take out. You can water down your journalism if you start to worry too much

about your relationship with somebody and not about your work.

“I don’t mean you are tricking people into saying things they are going to regret. I mean you witnessed an honest moment and honesty is sometimes hard for people.

“It is a challenge. The best feature writers I know maintain a professional distance while not losing their sense of being a human being.”

Jason Schreier on being truthful

“One of the things that I think is terrible in the world of feature writing is a lot of times people just make shit up. Oftentimes people will be inside of someone’s head or recreating dialogue or using other storytelling techniques to make for entertaining writing that is just not accurate or real and is more of a fictionalized story. I really hate that approach.

“Avoid that whenever possible. You can never do too much reporting, so erring on the side of overreporting and overinterviewing can be really useful.”

Misti Crane on authentic situations

“Creating situations so that a writer can write about them has become something I have seen happen recently. You want to write a lede about somebody walking the sidewalk where she was raped years ago. Is she doing that on her own or did you pick her up and drive her there and tell her to walk down the sidewalk to manufacture the situation.

“It is probably not in the completely off bounds in the area of journalism but it is slightly dishonest depending on how you write it.”

Zack Meisel on treating sources and their stories with respect

“There was a guy in the Indians organization, he was

the [Columbus Clippers, clubhouse manager](#). He was 32 years old and randomly had a heart attack while attending a Browns game and died. His wife at the time was pregnant with his twin boy.

“I reached out to her the next year and said, “I know this is asking a lot and this is extremely difficult for you, but if you’re up for it I would love to meet you, meet the twin boys and write a piece about them, and let people know, let them know, who their father was.”

“I didn’t know exactly the angle I was going to take with this yet when I was talking to her. There was a little bit of resistance at first; she had to think it over, which was completely understandable. Then she agreed to it. I went down there and interviewed her and saw the twins.

“I interviewed her in early May, talked to some players who knew the guy, and at some point, I decided this would be the perfect Father’s Day story. I decided to organize it so it would be a letter to the twins, telling them the kind of person their father was.

“For the entire four to five weeks I was working on it that thought crossed my mind every day. I need to make sure this piece gets 100% sign-off from the widow. I need to make sure this piece is perfect in her eyes because she was so gracious to let me come interview her after something that no one could imagine going through. It was stressful, any time I had a free minute — whether it was during an Indians game or just sitting there half paying attention to what’s happening on the field — I would just comb through this story one more time. Probably rewrote it 20 times, had every editor read it multiple times.

“You wake up that morning and you send it out to the world and you just cross your fingers and wait to hear something. Thankfully she loved it and was super

thankful, and I heard from other family members. The guy's dad reached out to me and still sends me messages every so often just checking in and saying hi and thank you.

"You honestly can give them something that they'll have forever. They said right after the story ran that they can't wait till the twins are old enough to read, and they can read that story and learn about their dad.

"It's tough, you want to do it justice. Only the person knows what they've been through so it's also difficult to really put yourself in their shoes and think "This stranger is going to write my life story. Can they accurately describe everything I went through and put my feelings into words?" It's really tough, too, because a lot of times the person can't do that themselves.

"It's nerve-racking, it's stressful, but it's also so rewarding in the end. You realize that you're writing for your audience that you write for everyday but really all you care about is the feedback from the subjects that you've written about."

23.

Time for Tips

'Go away from the herd instead of following it'

"People say, 'What advice do you have for people who want to be writers?' I say, they don't really need advice, they know they want to be writers, and they're gonna do it. Those people who know that they really want to do this and are cut out for it, they know it."

R.L. Stine

Writers offer these quick tips for getting your feature career started.

Lucas Sullivan

"Whether you are training for a marathon or you want to be the best baseball player or whatever, you have to put in

the time. You have to put in the effort, and if you don't, it will certainly come across in your writing. You will know when you sit down and write if you put in the time and the effort to write a good feature story. That is really the secret. The secret is really the time and the effort.

“Another secret is to have a different idea. Go away from the herd instead of following it and you can tell some really outstanding stories that way.”

Mike Wagner

“No one becomes a good feature writer by being a good texter or emailer. This is basic as hell, but get your butt out and learn how to have face-to-face conversations, which is a lost art.”

Misti Crane

“The secret in feature journalism writing is to be open and to be a sponge — to listen to more than you talk. The best things I have written have been because I just took in the experiences and really thought about them, and I didn't go in with an outline in my head and a goal in mind about the story I wanted to tell. Keeping an open mind and being curious is super important.

“It's so fun too. Keep an open mind and let the story take you where the story will take you. That will take you to where the story is more truthful and meaningful.”

Abby Vesoulis

“There's a difference between being a reporter and a writer. When I write 500-word pieces in the inverted pyramid style of this one thing that just happened, I can

say “Oh I reported this piece. I had all of the information handed to me because of some news event and then I just wrote it in an easily digestible fashion for people that want to know what that they think they just saw on CNN was.” I consider that reporting.

“Writing I consider taking a nuanced problem that nobody really understands, and being the person who puts all of the information that is out there into a storylike format where readers can sit down with it for 30 minutes and digest it.

“To be a good writer, you have to read other good writers. You can kind of borrow from the format they took for features. That’s not stealing someone’s idea; that’s just a format for a feature story. You can take more liberties with it after you have learned 100 times how to do it the way that it’s meant to be done.”

Zack Meisel

“You need to find your own voice, and that can be tough. That can take some time. The more you do it, the more comfortable you become with it. The big thing is knowing that with feature writing, it’s kind of a blank canvas. There’s no “This is how you’re supposed to do it.”

“The greatest part about it is you can let the story dictate kind of how you want to set things up. A lot of times, if I’m writing a story about someone who overcame some tragedy, you probably want to at least tease what the tragedy is in your opening section. Sometimes you get to the absolute, most dramatic moments of this person’s life and you make that your lede, and then you pull back a little bit and give more background details and build back

up to that point. That's one way. Or sometimes you just have a slow build to what the dramatic moment is.

“There really is no script you have to go by. What makes feature writing so rewarding is that you can choose what works best. That freedom is great.”

Alison Lukan

“You have to challenge yourself to never get comfortable to everything that you have access to, because you have access that tons of people would kill for. What in your access are you not sharing with people and where is the story there and is there something you should share with your readers?”

Melissa Hoppert

“The key is to not just focus on what people are saying. Look at the scene around you. Take notes, write down what strikes you. What are the colors, noises, sounds, the feelings you are feeling? How do they react? How do they describe something? Does their face light up? Don't worry about what they are saying. That's why you have a recorder. Take in the scene. What is striking them and striking you?”

Steve Rushin

“Write what the people want to hear. When I wrote baseball, I had to think about what people would want to be reading five days from now. I remember when Joe Carter won the 1993 World Series with a walk-off home run. While everyone else was asking about that at-bat an hour later, I was watching as he removed his clothes and

NICOLE KRAFT

someone was putting everything into a mylar bag to take to Hall of Fame. I didn't have the burden of writing that night so I could tell that story. It's natural to want to write features and look for some angle on this famous person that has not been done to death.

"The only way to develop is to read as much as you can. Who wants to be a writer if not already a reader? Who wants to be a chef if you are not already around food?"

Michael Farber

"At some point, you have to let it go. Magazines, like life, have deadlines."

SECTION V

LEARNING FEATURES FROM THE EXPERTS

Feature writers have all learned from their mistakes, and in this section, a collection of incredible writers share their experiences so we might all work to avoid them.

24.

Learning Features with Owen Daugherty

Owen Daugherty went from Ohio State's Lantern to an internship with the Columbus Dispatch, before heading to The Hill.

What were your biggest initial struggles/challenges with writing features?

Not overpowering the story and letting the interviewee tell the story through me, not the other way around.

How have you worked through them and what advice do you offer students to do the same?



Owen Daugherty

Listen! Always listen to the interview subject. I do my best to not go into an interview with preconceived notions. Human nature is to have stereotypes and hear answers through our lens, but for feature writing, I do my best to let those go and just listen.

What are some examples of where features went well or went badly, and what did you learn?

My first feature writing experience went poorly because I tried to fit the subject's story in the framework I had already predetermined in my head. I also had not done enough research on the topic or the subject and had not done enough reading of others' features work to be comfortable and confident in my own writing.

What is one specific story experience where your growth in the genre showed?

I had a great experience interviewing a subject that was clearly passionate and invested in what they were talking about, which lent itself so well to a terrific feature.

Telling the story through the subject and providing the necessary context and filler made for a solid feature.

25.

Learning Features with Monica DeMeglio



Monica DeMeglio

Monica DeMeglio is a former features writer with Gannett Newspapers, who is currently a content strategist at The Ohio State University.

What were your biggest initial struggles/challenges with writing features?

I attributed too much in the beginning. It's very disruptive for a reader who is trying to lose herself in a story to constantly have "said Jane Doe" and "according to her best friend" popping up. It's weak sauce. Establish yourself as the authority on the topic you're

writing about, trust yourself as the narrator of that story and develop that voice.

How have you worked through them and what advice do you offer students to do the same?

Great feature writing rests on the bedrock of solid research and reporting. You cannot be the voice of authority on the topic otherwise. If your copy is all frosting and no cake, you won't fool an editor or a reader.

What is one specific story experience where your growth in the genre showed?

My editor asked me if I was interested in writing a story about a man who was reunited with a daughter decades after he and his teenage girlfriend gave her up for adoption. "A nice Father's Day story maybe?" he suggested, hesitantly.

Lesson 1: Editors don't always have the time to thoroughly vet a story idea, and that's OK. Frankly, you want to do that part yourself anyway.

I told him I would check it out. As I recall, the guy's daughter found him and wrote him a letter. She was a grown woman by this point. He was an older man, with grown children of his own, too.

Lesson 2: Before you start asking questions, you have to start thinking like the narrator you're going to end up being. Which central character might you follow? If you don't know, then you need to think about the story from different perspectives.

In this case, it was really brave of her to write a letter to a man who, as far as she knew, had already "rejected" her in life, right? What if he did that again? That's a big risk. What road did she take before leading to that decision? That's a potential story.

In his case, the story could begin at that point and go on

after — does he respond and forge a relationship with this lost daughter? How does he handle this new relationship and integrate it with the existing ones he has with his wife and children today?

Or should we go back in time and explore the motivations for why he gave her up for adoption in the first place? And what road he's been on since? Has he longed for this relationship, and is this letter the happy ending as much as a new beginning?

Lesson 3: Approach the interview with empathy, but don't be afraid to ask the questions that need to be asked. Even if it makes everyone squirm.

The daughter was lovely, but the interview was not very interesting. The people who adopted her were kind, and they always made sure she knew that she was wanted, even if she wasn't their biological child. She knew that someday she would search for her parents.

The father, however, proved much more interesting of a character. He and his high school sweetheart had intended to get married, and their parents forbid them from continuing the relationship and raising their daughter together. He drove her to a "home for girls." After he dropped her off, he was to never see her again. That was the arrangement. That was the way things were handled back then. He spent a good part of his adult life being heartbroken over a lost love, a lost daughter — assuming he would never close the loop on either of those.

To get at the heart of that loss, though, I did have to ask him some tough questions. Having a child so young would have had an impact on his life forever. Isn't there a part of him that sees he was sort of able to drive away from that and not look back — literally and figuratively?

To this day, I remember the pain in his eyes, how he

was quiet for a moment and then how he nodded his head. Yes, in a way, he was able to build a life and a family he never would have had without that decision being made, whether it was made by him or for him.

In the end, the story was about forgiveness.

Forgiving himself. A daughter forgiving a father she never knew but was getting to know. Forgiving his own parents.

Lesson 4: Always look for the universal theme.

It was more than a Father's Day story. And that's the goal of a good features story, I think: taking a yarn and spinning it until it touches the heart of the reader and makes it something they care about and relate to on a personal level.

26.

Learning Features with Lori Kurtzman



Lori Kurtzman

Lori Kurtzman is a former Columbus Dispatch reporter who is now working as a brand journalism editor at The Ohio State University.

What were your biggest initial struggles/challenges with writing features?

Realizing you can't write your way out of bad reporting. Good feature writing begins with thorough, painstaking reporting, which is how I learned that nouns paint a better picture than adjectives.

How have you worked through them and what advice do you offer students to do the same?

Learning the hard way — sitting down to write a story

and realizing you don't have what you need. And so picking up the phone again, or getting in the car again, and finding the details you missed. Another lesson I learned is to tell the story that's there, rather than the story you wanted to tell.

Here's an example where [I went to Bill Combs' home](#) intending to write a story about World War II. I came out with something quite different.

What are some examples of where features went well or went badly, and what did you learn?

[This obituary went over surprisingly well.](#) It was about a man I only knew as Paul F. I spent a long time digging through his Yelp reviews and interviewing two Yelpers and his brother to write this.

Again, this is all about the reporting. Paul essentially tells his own story.

Here is [a story that fails](#) because there are two subjects, and I only reached one of their families. I should have tried harder to get the other family and flesh out the other person better. Again, feature writing is all about reporting.

What is one story experience where your growth in the genre showed?

This story began when I was out on a different story and noticed a picture of a girl posted to a bulletin board. I was curious, so I asked who Danielle was.

What unfolded was [an obituary like I had never written.](#) This involved quite a bit of reporting for a fairly short story and allowed me to introduce emotion without hitting anyone over the head that THIS IS SAD.

Earlier in my career, I might have been tempted to push the sad parts of this story, but as I developed as a reporter and writer, I learned that feature stories told simply —

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ones that allow the reader to live in them and experience them — are better than those that try too hard.

27.

Learning Features with Kristen Schmidt

Kristen Schmidt is a longtime editor and writer with 20 years of experience in magazines, newspapers, who currently serves as associate editor of the Ohio State Alumni Magazine.



Kristen Schmidt

What were your biggest initial struggles/challenges with writing features?

For me, the hardest thing about writing features is the writing and creating the necessary creative headspace to do that effectively.

Research and reporting are easy tasks to wedge into

daily work, but the writing requires more space and time of a quality that is difficult to find in any workplace, but especially scarce in wide open newsrooms and, if you work in an office that was built recently, wide open office spaces.

How have you worked through them and what advice do you offer students to do the same?

I'm grateful to have spent my entire career thus far working for editors who don't particularly care where I'm doing my job, as long as I'm doing it.

I start by building a good relationship with my editors and explaining to them what I need to do my job. When I worked at a newspaper, there was no break from the daily grind of two or three stories for each edition.

There was no time off the beat to work on a big feature story. There was only meticulously carving out time and space where you could. Over the years, I've shifted from working too-long hours for too-little pay to "make time" for feature writing toward becoming a dedicated planner and organizer of my time and tasks.

Now, I have the luxury of blocking off hours in my schedule for "maker" time. That often happens on Fridays, which are light on meetings and quiet in the office. Planning this time makes me more willing to put in the daily grind stuff earlier in the week (so many meetings, so many tiny tasks) and look forward to the big think stuff later in the week.

I'm more at peace with having my schedule chopped up in dozens of pieces if I know I've reserved some time for myself and the work that is "important," rather than "urgent."

What is an example of where features went well or went badly, and what did you learn?

Ugh. I wrote a terrible feature for Columbus Monthly

several years ago about Columbus School for Girls. It was super one-sided, and I fell into a trap of allowing the school to refer alumnae to me. Well, all those alumnae, as accomplished and impressive as they were, sang pretty much the same song about the institution.

I missed out on a lot of perspectives because I was trying to write a big feature while also being publication editor, and getting help with sourcing was, well, helpful. I was not thinking as critically as I should have because I was so pressed for time and I was treating the feature as something “urgent” rather than “important.”

Skepticism and seeing holes in reporting and writing takes headspace! Critical thinking! Distance! I found none of those things, and the story wound up being mostly surface material, nothing deep or particularly interesting.

I had no business writing a feature, given my other responsibilities, and the best thing I could have done for the publication was to do my job and hire someone who had the time and ability to do the story justice. I think it was a great story idea with a poor outcome.

Being brutally honest with yourself, learning to say no, learning to ask for reasonable deadlines, asking for help. These are all humbling, valuable tools to have when taking on a feature.

What is one story experience where your growth in the genre showed?

Years ago, as a courts reporter at a small daily newspaper on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, I was at the clerk’s office digging through the day’s docket when the regular clerk said something in passing. She said she was seeing a bunch of cases based on something called doctor shopping. People were being charged with trying to obtain prescriptions for pain meds.

That passing comment caught my ear, and I started looking at these cases. Then I started researching oxycodone, which was pretty new on the market at the time. I kept branching further and further out, gathering little pieces of the story, while also stopping to think about what was missing, whose voice needed to be represented, how we wanted to tell the story.

So the reporting was building but it was also being managed through conversations and status checks. (Are we there yet? Have we gone too far? What are we missing?) The story, a Sunday cover piece, wound up winning a statewide Associated Press award.

Much to my surprise and dismay, it was among the first wave of stories about what has today become a crisis of opioid use and misuse. I had good editors on that story, and I had solid footing and sources on my beat. I was good at tracking people down, and people were willing to talk about the issue, from cops and prosecutors to people in recovery.

The success of the story was a symbiosis between a reporter who was prepared to find and pursue the subject and editors who were able to direct and correct. I love it when these conditions recur — especially because now I'm on the editing side, and I am driven by a love of facilitating the work of others.

Any other advice you'd like to add?

Screw up many times. Buy too many planners. Try too many apps. Find a method of time and task planning and management that works for you and use it. Adapt it when your life changes. Evaluate it every so often. Be willing to change.

Only you can decide how you approach and execute the

tasks of work and life. If you don't find a way to harness those tasks, they will certainly harness you.

Also, use your drive home every day to review the day. How did it go? What could you have done differently? Why? How would you handle the situation if you could do it again? How will you prepare to make a better choice next time? What will you work on tomorrow?

Great work follows a long line of work that ranges from awful to mediocre — and the ability to process failure into lessons learned, bridges crossed, mistakes understood and acknowledged.

28.

Learning Features with Jeff Trimble

Jeff Trimble was an international journalist, editor and media manager for more than 35 years before joining the Ohio State faculty.



Jeff Trimble

What were your biggest initial struggles/challenges with writing features?

Getting the balance right between facts and the detail and nuance that draw and hold the attention of readers.

As opposed to factual news writing, I tended to include so much “color” in feature writing that it was difficult to sustain the narrative thread. I tended to throw in all the color detail I had in an effort to making copy

“interesting,” rather than using the best such details to help reinforce essential elements.

I also tended to use quotes that were redundant and did not add value to the narrative.

How have you worked through them and what advice do you offer students to do the same?

Good editors are essential. The best ones were present throughout the reporting and writing process, with the result being clean, smart copy that met their expectations; the worst ones made or approved the assignment, waited for the copy to land, and then rewrote to suit their preferences.

It also helped me to read a LOT of good feature writing by journalists of my generation as well as those of previous generations.

What are some examples of where features went well or went badly, and what did you learn?

Often in my career as a foreign correspondent, I only got one shot, one opportunity, to interview or speak with key players as I worked on longer features. Sometimes these interactions were brief or happened spontaneously, such as catching a senior government official in a corridor for a few minutes.

The better prepared I was for such encounters, the more successful they were. Lesson: Do your homework and then do it again before heading into the field to report.

In many cases, you'll be able to review your interview notes and follow up with sources to clarify or expand on points made. But don't assume this will be the case!

Can you provide a specific story experience where your growth in the genre showed?

As a correspondent in Moscow during the tumultuous final years of the Soviet Union, I often found myself in

crowded situations, trying to get exclusive comments or other material from officials, dissidents and others who were in constant demand by the global media.

After repeated scenes of jostling and even trying to shout out colleagues, I learned an important lesson: patience. I realized that it made more sense to build relationships over time with officials and other sources. Rather than trying to be the first to get a quote, I endeavored to seek relationships that ultimately resulted in comments and information that was richer and more substantive.

I made use of this technique in December 1986 when Soviet physicist and dissident Andrei Sakharov was allowed to return to Moscow from internal exile. Rather than fighting the crowd that met Sakharov as he got off the train, I sought out Yelena Bonner, Sakharov's spouse and also a noted dissident, as she stepped onto the platform.

I had taken time to get to know Bonner, who unlike Sakharov was allowed to travel freely. I spoke with her, untroubled by other reporters, for 10 minutes or so. This resulted in a private invitation to Sakharov's Moscow apartment the next day.

Over tea and cookies I conducted an exclusive 30-minute interview that formed that basis of a successful feature.

Any other advice you'd like to add?

Think carefully about quotes in feature writing. Quotes should not restate points already made in the narrative; they need to add unique value to move the story forward, or at very least to introduce a new thought or topic rather than to restate points already made.

Don't quote someone just to prove the fact that you actually did the interview!

Feature Examples

There are many examples of outstanding writing sprinkled throughout this book, but here are additional articles not to be missed.

[“An Unbelievable Story of Rape”](#) by Ken Armstrong and T. Christian Miller, The Marshall Project and Pro Publica

[“Animals: The Horrific True Story of the Zanesville Zoo Massacre”](#) by Chris Jones, Esquire

[“Death of an Innocent: How Christopher McCandless lost his way in the wilds”](#) by Jon Krakauer, Outside Magazine

[“Derek Boogaard: A Boy Learns to Brawl”](#) by John Branch, New York Times

[“Fatal Distraction: Forgetting a Child in the Backseat of a Car Is a Horrifying Mistake. Is It a Crime?”](#) by Gene Weingarten, Washington Post

[“Friday Night Lights”](#) by Buzz Bissinger, Sports Illustrated

[“Frozen Alive: The Cold Hard Facts of Freezing to Death”](#) by Peter Stark, Outside Online

[“I Was a Warehouse Wage Slave”](#) by Mac McClelland, Mother Jones

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[“In Deaths at Rail Crossings, Missing Evidence and Silence”](#) by Walt Bogdanich, New York Times

[“Like Something the Lord Made”](#) by Katie McCabe, The Washingtonian

[“Rapture of the Deep”](#) by Gary Smith, Sports Illustrated

[“Shattered Glass”](#) by Buzz Bissinger, Vanity Fair

[“Snow fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek”](#) by John Branch, New York Times

[“The Falling Man”](#) by Tom Junod, Esquire

[“The Girl in the Window”](#) by Lane DeGregory, Tampa Bay Times

[“The Stalking of Kristin”](#) by George Lardner, Jr., Washington Post

[“Where Alabama Inmates Fade Into Old Age”](#) by Rick Bragg, New York Times

Thank You to Our Contributors

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