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Breaking Into Print With Feature Articles

Ralph Corrigan

If you're anxious to get started as a published writer but don't know where to begin, feature articles for newspapers provide an ideal way to break into print.

Think about the pluses: No credentials are needed (you can be a raw beginner), and features follow an established format so they are easy to write.

Features are those human interest "soft news" stories tucked into the "Living," "Local," and "Lifestyle" sections of the newspaper that explore the nooks and crannies of our everyday lives. A memorial bridge in town, a local ballet class for kids, remarkable pets, inventions, new businesses, a profile of your neighbor - all qualify as topics for feature stories. Friends, business associates, even family members, make excellent sources for features. What about the beekeeper next door who wins blue ribbons for his honey? Or the woman on the next block who started a flower arrangement business in her home? Or the daughter of your co-worker who anchors a TV show?

Local events, another prime source for features, get top billing in hometown papers, and the possibilities are endless. The annual church-sponsored bazaar, the free lecture at a nearby college, the Memorial Day Parade down Main Street, poetry readings at the neighborhood coffeehouse or bookstore, and performances at your public library-- all suggest potential stories to the alert feature writer.

Perhaps you enjoy discovering new sites, or learning more about favorite local haunts; both make excellent stories. Or you could write a feature on a recently renovated park, an historic building, a nearby museum, or even the clam bar opening down the street.

Story ideas lurk where you least expect to find them. One enterprising freelancer sold a piece on the sizes and uses of nails in a hardware store! Another delved into the history of a park statue, and still another published an article about a prize collection of model ships and one about a neighbor who raised rare birds in his cellar.

1) Seek advice. Let's say you've come up with a strong idea for a feature and you're seeking expert advice to help you fine-tune it. First, do your homework. Find the most knowledgeable people that should be interviewed and why you think your feature belongs in your hometown paper. Then write a short note to the editor, outlining your idea, and be sure to include your address and phone number, and a self-addressed, stamped-envelope (SASE). Most newspaper editors are on the lookout for well-crafted features by free-lance writers and are happy to offer advice on story angles, sources and length when an idea piques their interest.

- 2) Entertain, entertain, entertain. Whether it's a nostalgic look at the early days of a section of your town or city, or a profile of the much-loved local school-crossing guard at the corner with twenty years of service, readers crave upbeat "success" stories that provide a respite from the mayhem and disasters crowding the front pages. So focus on the good news, tickle the funny bone, or tell a rousing story.
- 3) Keep the article timely. If you offer a special slant on a news story (perhaps a profile on someone featured in a front-page story), or report on a recent lecture, club happening, or town event, timeliness has to be built into the article. When writing on topics with seasonal appeal, keep an eye on the calendar. Talk about skiing and wood stoves in winter, and wind surfing and mulching in the summer.
- 4) Be accurate. Feature writers are the eyes and ears of the readers - collecting facts, conducting interviews, and checking the available "background" information (newspaper clippings, local histories, scrapbooks of people they interview). In a sense, when you affix your byline to the article, you're saying that the information provided, in the words of journalist Theodore H. White, is "as close to the truth" as you can make it.

So keep the quotes word for word. The pros might shudder at the thought of confirming a quote ("get it right the first time," they'd say), but if you are starting out as a writer, rechecking the accuracy of quotations before mailing the manuscript for publication is a wise decision. A little rechecking here and there can save you from headaches later.

- 5) Prepare for interviews. Beginning writers frequently suffer from a case of the jitters before a face-to-face interview. Don't panic. Most interviews are ego trips for the subjects. Find out as much as possible

about the person, decide on the angle for your article, and then prepare a list of questions you want answered. If the on-the-spot responses suggest a better slant, don't be afraid to jettison your prepared script. Always go for the best story.

- 6) Take notes. How to record the interview is a personal preference. Some writers swear by handwritten notes, others prefer the tape recorder. But relying entirely on a tape recorder is inviting disaster, since they are notorious for jamming or conking out on dead batteries at the most inopportune moments. One writer drove five hours to interview a big-name artist residing in another state. The minute she got in her car to return home she pressed the "play" button on her recorder for a sound check and was horrified to discover a garbled tape. Luckily, she had jotted down notes, and with help from the photographer with her, she was able to salvage enough of the interview for an article. The pros rely on a combination of tape recorder and handwritten notes.

After the legwork and research, the next step is to arrange the bits and pieces of information into a solid article. Luckily, features follow a simple pattern: lead, transition, body, and conclusion.

Before beginning to compose the piece, keep in mind that newsprint differs from other forms of writing. Paragraphs (called "grafs") tend to run only a few sentences. Avoid long columns of gray print that invariably send readers flipping the page to find something less daunting.

The Lead. Start with a bang. An anecdote, a startling statement, an important fact, even a strong quote can hook the reader's attention and introduce the story. And above all else, be creative. Unlike the sober, matter-of-fact approach that works with news stories, feature writing calls for a more informal, lighthearted tone.

Here's how Molly O'Neill began her recent New York Times front-page feature on the increasing tolerance for messiness in the American home:

Dust bunnies under the couch. Cobwebs in the corners. A grimy shellac over the contents of kitchen cupboards. In a culture where cleanliness has long been equated with godliness, these tell-tale signs should be anathema. But rather than repenting with a vigorous spring cleaning, many Americans are changing creeds.

This sprightly lead paragraph fills in all but the last of the 5 W's (the who, what, when, where, and why questions). O'Neill serves up the "why" in a transitional paragraph deftly highlighted by a quote from an authority:

"Bless the mess," said Mary Ellen Pinkham, whose housecleaning advice column is syndicated in 150 newspapers. While she maintains white-glove standards in her own home, she believes this level of cleanliness is rapidly becoming an anomaly.

"The American home is getting dirtier," she said. "People have better things to do with their time than clean."

A word of advice: Quote a credible authority near the beginning of your piece, and readers will take notice. It's proof that you've done your homework.

The Body. Aim for a spicy mix of facts, direct quotes, paraphrases, reported information - all play key roles in keeping the reader from nodding off while the story unfolds.

In a recent Mother's Day feature titled "What Mom Done Told Me..." for The Los Angeles Times, staff writer Bettijane Levine sets the stage as follows:

No, politeness is not extinct. In fact, a favorite piece of Mom's advice, from readers young and old, is: "Always write a thank-you note."

Then she adds a direct quote from a source:

An Encino woman is one of many who wrote to express amazement at "how touched and grateful people are when you take time to acknowledge them in writing."

And, finally, she paraphrases a source, then quotes the source directly:

Judith Martin, who writes the syndicated Miss Manners column, says only ingrates and louts would consider the written thank-you note an obsolete form.

"As long as there are presents given, parties attended, or kindnesses extended in this world, the thank-you note will live."

The above ploy - the paraphrase followed by the direct quote - is a given in news writing, a trick of the trade. First, you introduce what the source is going to say, then you quote the source directly. "According to. . ." is the easiest way to slip into the paraphrasing tactic.

The Ending - Features tend to follow a story line and are meant to be read straight through, ending with a flourish - a summary, a "refer-back" to the lead, or a memorable quote from the principal source. Carol Kleiman, in a feature on secretaries in the workplace for The Chicago Tribune, saves until the very end this quote by professional development authority Susan Fenner:

"I saw a classified ad asking for a secretary able to do financial work, forecasting, software packages, travel extensively, take shorthand and also have other good secretarial skills," said Fenner. "The salary was \$70,000 a year. It was breathtaking."

The hot quote tying everything together at the end is called a "clincher." Seasoned reporters are always on the lookout for these blockbuster endings.

When revising the rough draft, aim for a playful style by adding color, sharpness and sparkle to the copy. Take extra time to select words with care. Plans are "altered" instead of "changed," you discover a "niche" instead of a "spot." Vibrant language keeps your reader alert. Use the strongest, most precise action verbs you can, and cut all unnecessary adverbs and adjectives.

EVEN if the editor gave you a "go ahead" on speculation, unless you are hand-delivering the article, you'll need a brief covering letter to accompany your manuscript. Keep it simple. "Enclosed is a feature on which I hope you will find ----- suitable for publication, " is all you need.

Then follow proper manuscript etiquette. Place your name, address, and telephone number in the top left corner of page one, the approximate number of words in the top right, and the title and your byline centered one-third down the page.

Subsequent pages call for a "slug" in the top left corner (your last name, and the article's title directly underneath), and the page number in the top right corner.

If you've interviewed all your subjects, researched the background information, stressed the human interest angle, and managed to serve up the whole concoction with wit and style, chances are you'll end up published. And even get a check from an editor!

Ralph Corrigan, who has had over forty features and op-ed pieces in such publications as The Hartford (Conn.) Courant, The New York Times, The Chronicle of Higher Education, Fairfield (Conn.) County Woman, The Advocate, Connecticut Magazine, and Inside Karate, is a professor of communications studies at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut. He is also the author of Themes for Study (Holt, Rinehart and Winston) and a former editor of The Connecticut English Journal and The Sacred Heart University Review.