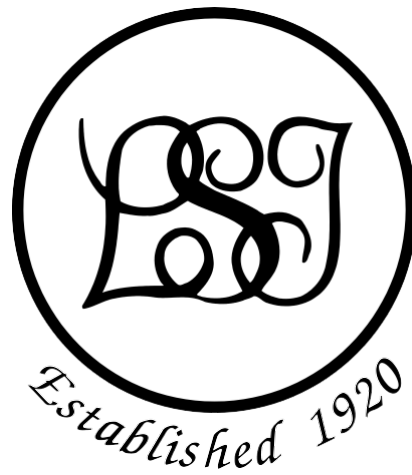


JOURNALISM AND NEWSWRITING



LESSON 10 More About Features

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CHAPTER 10

MORE ABOUT FEATURES

Profiles. Interviewing techniques. Successful interviews. Features intros.

PROFILES

There is an enormous amount of satisfaction to be gained from producing a well-written profile. Apart from providing the opportunity to meet new and interesting people from all walks of life, the writing process is a marvellous test of your professional discipline.

For a start, you are completely on your own. It is up to you to ask all the right questions, win the interviewee's trust, respond to any unexpected titbits they throw into the conversation, spot new angles as they arise, organise the information you gather in a logical way and craft the whole package into an entertaining, perceptive feature that people will want to read.

The good news is that they usually involve a single, straightforward face-to-face interview. The bad news is that they are not as easy to do well as you might think. If you are too sycophantic in your writing, the finished piece will read like an advertising feature – and will probably be extremely boring. On the other hand, if you are too aggressive in your interviewing technique, the individual is likely to clam up and tell you as little as possible – presuming that they don't lose their rag altogether and throw you out of the house or just walk away!

It's important to remember that your aim is to satisfy the reader – not necessarily to write the sort of profile the interviewee wants you to write (or would write themselves if they got the chance). Naturally, your feature should be an accurate portrayal of an individual. But people have some strange preconceptions about how they appear to other people – or how they would like to appear.

Honesty is the important word here. If someone comes across in an interview as cold, angry, bored or suspicious, then these are valid adjectives to use in your write-up. They may not be how the person you are speaking to wants to be perceived, but if you tell the truth and use your words wisely, you are unlikely to get any negative feedback.

Your quest, remember, is to provide genuine insights. With that in mind, the ultimate compliment you could receive after publication is getting a phone call from your interviewee saying: "I enjoyed reading your piece but I was a little shocked when you described me as severe and preoccupied. That's not how I see myself. But when I spoke to my wife, she said it was absolutely spot-on. Well done."

Virtually anyone can provide the basis of a fascinating profile if you can find a suitable angle. Celebrities are obvious targets, but prominent figures in the local community are of interest to the regional press and trade magazines are always on the look-out for high achievers and good human interest stories.

People with unusual lifestyles or tales to tell appeal to the magazine market and even total 'unknowns' may be suitable profile material if you can find the right 'peg'.

Your approach and technique will vary slightly according to how well known your chosen interviewee is. The rich and famous can be more difficult to track down, are pestered all the time for interviews and may be less forthcoming when you actually get to meet them. They are much more experienced at answering questions without giving away anything they don't want to and your readers already know what they look like and quite a lot of background about them. So your challenge is to unearth new material, wherever possible. Minor celebrities or 'ordinary' individuals are easier to track down, may be more responsive to your questions and may not be known at all to your readers.

Depending on the approach of your own publication, coverage may be restricted to a predictable cross-section of celebrity profiles, with a strong emphasis on soap stars and TV presenters. Other types of 'celebrity' may also feature – from poets to politicians, sporting personalities, pop stars, authors, stand-up comics, business people and internet celebrities.

Regional papers may have a broader approach: as long as there is a strong local angle, they might be interested in the work of an inspirational teacher or a tireless charity fundraiser, the new custodians of a clifftop castle, a pensioner who once competed in the Olympics, a cyclist who has just completed a round-the-world trip for charity – even a murderer finally released on parole after 20 years behind bars.

There are basically three categories of interviewee for feature profiles:

- ordinary people who are unknown to readers
- experts and specialists
- celebrities

To justify a profile piece, those in the first two categories will normally already be in the news for some reason, be involved in an interesting project, have an intriguing hobby or have achieved something extraordinary. This needn't be dramatic, but it should be interesting – and relevant to your publication.

INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES

Lesson Nine looked at the importance of quotes in many different types of published features. In virtually every case, interviews have played a crucial role in shaping the finished article – not simply as a means of getting information from people, but to help inject the writing with life and pace.

Interviews allow us to obtain facts, opinions and anecdotes from people. Once we have collected the information, we will inevitably edit and paraphrase much of what we have gathered, so that our piece has both clarity and brevity.

But there will also be occasions when we want to repeat things our interviewee has said word for word, because carefully selected quotes add:

- **vitality**
- **topicality**
- **authenticity**
- **clarity**

They also help to vary the rhythm of an article, put facts and background information into context, reveal the personality of the speaker, increase the 'human interest' element of the feature and – particularly importantly from your point of view as writer– make the finished work unique.

You will have gathered that the task of producing an article for publication – and therefore the art of journalism itself – relies on a combination of skills which are of more or less equal importance:

- **researching**
- **interviewing**
- **writing**

Despite this, interviewing techniques do not feature prominently in many formal training courses for newspaper journalists (although for obvious reasons, more attention is paid to the subject in the training of those starting careers in radio and television, where their interviewing skills are on public display).

This is a major oversight, because while 'essentials' like law, public affairs and shorthand are important, we should not assume that all writers find it a 'natural' process to interview people. Some can unintentionally antagonise, irritate or patronise those they interview; others may feel shy, awkward, intimidated or tongue-tied and, as a result, will almost certainly miss out on the opportunity to obtain the vital information that is needed for the finished story.

Much has been written about interviewing techniques, but like so many other 'interactive' skills – teaching and public speaking, for example – practice is likely to be more beneficial than book learning, especially if you have the courage to look back after an interview and analyse what worked and what didn't. An earlier lesson concluded that a good journalist should be accurate, reliable, persistent, inquisitive, sociable, enthusiastic, dogged, patient, confident, sympathetic, empathetic, curious and sensitive. Nowhere are such qualities of more importance than when you are conducting an interview.

Sometimes this is self-evident: if you look and sound bored, you can hardly blame the interviewee for feeling aggrieved and showing you the door.

But we are not always good at recognising how we present ourselves to other people. Some otherwise professional journalists may not realise that they appear intimidating and aggressive, for example – yet standing very close to your subject

while loudly flicking over pages of your shorthand notebook under their nose and reeling off blunt, probing questions will certainly convey this impression.

A talented young reporter might initially be completely unaware that their high level of concentration may lend their face a 'clinical' expression, giving people the (false) impression they are cold, bored or uncaring. Efficiency is a valuable asset, but if it comes across to interviewees as a lack of empathy, there will be times when they will undoubtedly lose out on stories because people feel discouraged from 'opening up'.

The same applies to journalists who are patronising or seem arrogant, as well as those who ask an endless stream of blindingly obvious questions without showing any real interest in the answers. People find this intensely irritating and on occasions downright insulting. It's not just trainees who can make a mess of interviews, either. Some of Fleet Street's finest have driven interviewees to distraction with banal, ignorant, arrogant, intrusive or unnecessarily vicious questions.

Who calls the shots? Never assume you have a divine right to obtain an interview – some people are bound to be wary about baring their souls and others may refuse point-blank because they treasure their privacy. When you arrange an interview, you should be honest about the purpose behind it. In normal circumstances, there is nothing to be gained from attempting to mislead the person you wish to speak to – and you may leave yourself open to accusations of professional misconduct in the process.

At the same time, as a professional journalist you should not shrink from asking difficult questions about potentially sensitive issues. Having done your background research and won the interviewee's trust, you have to choose the best moment to broach a 'difficult' area.

Handled delicately, such questions needn't offend – and nor should you take umbrage if you are met with a flat refusal to talk. But if the question is a valid one – and if you can justifiably say it is one your readers are bound to be asking – then you shouldn't shirk the issue. More often than not, you will find yourselves surprised by people's frankness, especially if you are writing for a reputable publication which is not into sensationalism.

Of course, if you intend to tackle a shady landlord about poor treatment of tenants, or other equally contentious interviews, you will need to be more forceful, confident and persuasive – offering the chance to put their side of the story, for example, or answer in print some of the allegations that have been made. But investigative features are a specialist field and can be a legal minefield for the inexperienced.

SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEWS

The following pointers should help to ensure you adopt an efficient, professional approach to every interview you conduct:

- **Research the subject thoroughly in advance**

This will automatically give you confidence and create a favourable impression with the interviewee. It will also equip you to ask more probing or stimulating questions,

and discover which subjects are fair game or off limits. This would require where possible, checking the interviewee's individual website, social media activity and any previous interviews they may have done with other publications or TV channels.

- **Don't forget your 'angle'**

Think through what you need to know and plan your questions accordingly. Structure the interview to ensure you get all the relevant information you need. Be flexible enough to explore new and intriguing avenues of conversation, but don't get sidetracked against your will and don't simply ask questions at random – if you leave yawning gaps, you won't be able to fill them afterwards.

- **Be professional and businesslike, friendly, courteous and polite**

You want to win the trust of the person you are speaking to. It's a bonus if you actually like each other, but you shouldn't rely on hitting it off instantly with everyone you meet (and if you do, be wary of displaying bias in your writing). It's more important that you feel able to speak to anyone comfortably, regardless of class, creed or profession and establish sufficient rapport to be able to conduct a relaxed interview in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

- **Choose your venue**

The best place for an interview is the subject's own home. Apart from making them feel more at ease, it is more likely to give you an accurate picture of their personality. In some cases, their office or work environment may be more appropriate, particularly if it is likely to provide you with background colour. Try to avoid neutral, anonymous settings like hotels and restaurants that will deprive you of visual cues and anywhere where there is too much background noise or too many interruptions. Avoid meeting over lunch – it's difficult to talk (or write) while you're eating. Cars are a good place too in terms of soundproofing.

- **Use a reliable recording device if you don't have shorthand**

Many journalists use their smartphones to record an interview but this can be an issue if your interview is done on the phone. There are apps that can be downloaded to enable you to record phone interviews and you may need to do your own research on this to find the best one for your needs. If you are doing the interview via video-calling software, it should be relatively easy to record.

- **Take charge from the start**

It's vital you control the shape and direction of the interview if you are going to come away with all the information you need. If you are confident, professional, properly prepared and clearly focused, you stand every chance of success.

- **Use your eyes**

It's not just what the interviewee says that's important, but how they say it. Watch their body language, how they're dressed, how they interact with other people (from the waiter to their wife). If they're on home turf, the surroundings may be relevant too – both on a grand scale (if you're sitting in the conservatory of their £5m mansion)

and the small (the books on their shelves, pictures on their mantelpiece, etc). What does the room say about their personality?

- **Don't get drawn into a debate**

A little feedback and small-talk can help put your interviewee at ease. But don't talk too much – this isn't a pub discussion and your views aren't relevant or important. Apart from which, you don't want to waste valuable time when you could be asking questions.

- **Ask open-ended questions**

The way you phrase questions can encourage your interviewee to open up and explain something in their own words and in some detail. Don't shut them up by asking questions which beg yes/no answers.

- **Don't forget vital details**

There will come a point when it is clear you have all the information you need and it's time to wind the interview up. As you do so, run through a quick mental checklist to make sure you have everything you need. Most importantly – especially in short phone interviews – do you know how to spell their name, and do you know their official title? How old are they? Where do they live?

- **Don't agree to show the interviewee the finished article**

It's unprofessional and it is bound to cause problems because, given the chance, few people can resist tinkering with an article about themselves. Simply tell them it's not the editorial policy of whichever publication you are writing for – unless, of course, your editor has made some special arrangement to the contrary.

- **Don't pay for an interview**

It's unlikely you will be asked, but there may be celebrities – a disgraced MP, for example, or certain soccer stars – who think they should be paid for interviews. Unless your editor tells you to the contrary, tell them your publication doesn't believe in chequebook journalism.

FEATURES INTROS

You've done the research, got all the facts at your fingertips and carried out the interviews – but how do you actually start writing your feature? Unlike news stories, there's no straightforward formula you can follow to write the 'perfect' intro – and sometimes a number of approaches will produce equally valid results.

Hopefully, a few pointers will help focus your thoughts and give you a fighting chance of coming up with an intro that works. But don't spend too much time crafting your intro when you first start writing your feature. (It can cause writer's block and prevent you from getting the rest of the article down on paper).

Go with the best line you can think of and return to it when the feature's virtually finished. It's not uncommon for a better intro to strike you later on, once you start organising your thoughts and have got into your 'flow' of the article.

Standfirsts

By definition, news stories tend to be telling you about something which has just happened that you don't already know about. News intros are brief and to the point, telling you who, what, when, where, why, how. The 'when' is particularly important. As we have seen, most news stories include the words 'last night', 'today' or 'this week' – topicality being vital.

Features should be topical, too but they aren't quite as breathless as news stories. Generally they develop or enlarge upon a current or breaking story and will often presume you already know a little bit about the subject matter.

The standfirst is the device used to introduce a feature and put it in context and you may find it very useful to develop a knack for writing these. Often, it will bear a strong resemblance to the original news intro – and it will also usually include a 'today' line, to establish the feature's topicality. Do bear in mind though that the standfirst and intro are separate entities and you will need to re-introduce your subject in full in the main piece, even though you have mentioned them in the standfirst.

For example, a news story might read:

Dorningham councillors voted last night to introduce sweeping new parking controls on the outskirts of the city.

The news story would go on to explain what measures are to be taken, what councillors said at the meeting and how people have reacted to the decision. The features editor might suggest that someone writes a topical news feature on the subject for the following night's paper. Part of the standfirst for the feature could be almost identical to the original news intro:

Dorningham councillors have voted to introduce sweeping new parking controls on the outskirts of the city. David Crisp finds out how commuters and local residents are reacting to the initiative

In practice, the standfirst is likely to be slightly reworded to achieve maximum impact and reflect any new developments emerging from the feature writer's research. It is, after all, something of a sales pitch, a tool that is being used to 'sell' the feature by hinting at what interesting new information it contains.

Sweeping new parking controls planned for the outskirts of Dorningham will only make congestion worse, say local residents. David Crisp reports on the fierce backlash to this week's controversial council decision

Note how the standfirst:

- refers to the original news story
- 'sells' the feature
- is topical (i.e. today, this week)
- includes the writer's byline
- promises to develop an issue, put it in context, introduce a new twist or
- explore a different angle

The standfirst establishes with the readers that the news story has already been published, giving the feature writer free rein to adopt a very different approach.

News angles

Does the feature have a strong news angle? If it does, your approach will be similar to that used in a news story in that you will need to highlight the most significant new development right at the start of the story.

If you have uncovered totally new material, you may have to write both a news story and a feature, to be published in the same edition of the paper. In this case, your news story follows the traditional formula, distilling the key facts and incorporating concise, relevant quotes. The feature is likely to 'develop' the news story – examining the broader significance of the problem, or exploring an issue in greater depth. The standfirst on the feature ties in the two articles. The stronger the news angle, the simpler and more straightforward your intro can be.

Who's affected?

If you are writing about an issue that affects a large number of readers, you will probably focus on the problem in global terms. Conversely, many features will specifically choose to focus on the local implications of a national story. If it affects only a specific individual or family, your intro will make the most of this human angle and be much more specific. If a local man publishes a book about Antarctica's melting glaciers, it's quite likely that the news story might effectively say just that in the intro. A feature focusing in greater depth on the subject, however, might choose to reflect the global implications reflected by the book's content:

The world's last and most spectacular wilderness is under threat – and the way we treat its vast frozen wastes could dictate whether we survive or self-destruct. A dramatic ultimatum, but a very real one according to Dorningham author Scott Ridley, whose latest book about Antarctica's melting glaciers is published this week.

On the other hand, a survey highlighting the growing number of youngsters sleeping rough on London's streets is unlikely to hit the headlines in Dorningham unless a local angle can be identified:

In the twilight world of London's West End, a steadily-growing army of Dorningham youngsters are sleeping rough and fighting to find work.

The extent of the problem was highlighted this week when anxious parents inundated local police with calls after hearing of the gruesome discovery of human remains in a North London sewer.

Human interest

A desire to capture the full drama of a specific incident may prompt you to focus on the individuals involved:

Farmer Andrew Cunningham could only look on in horror as an express train smashed into his vehicle at over 50mph on a farm crossing outside Dorningham.

Eyewitness approach

For news features with a strong visual element, you may prefer the 'eyewitness' approach as the best way of humanising the issue:

There were hundreds of people thronging the streets of Dorningham. Some had just left their homes for half an hour while others had taken an unofficial break from work; but it was all worthwhile when the town was suddenly plunged into darkness and the magical solar eclipse appeared.

The eyewitness approach is particularly useful where there is no strong news line, but there is a reasonable amount of 'colour' that you have researched at first-hand:

The boat scudding at high speed across the waves looks for all the world like any other small pleasure craft.

Only the distinctive epaulettes of the crew betray the fact that these are customs men testing out their new weapon in the battle against people smugglers.

Or:

Inside the large sorting office in Dorningham's Crown Street, the teams of postal workers scurry around like demented worker ants. At peak times, when the trickle of bags turns into a deluge, it looks as if they are about to be swamped by the swirling piles of letters and parcels.

Sometimes the eyewitness approach can be used to give a story an unexpected twist, injecting a little more emotion into a story where the bare facts might not register in human terms:

The headlights of hundreds of slow-moving cars lit up the roads in an early morning procession to Dorningham's doomed steelworks.

It should have been the first day back at work after the New Year break for the 890 men employed by British Aluminium. Instead the numbed and confused workforce were told to pack up their tools and go home.

The eyewitness approach is also very useful in features profiles, where the person being interviewed has no dramatic new revelations to share with you and you are struggling to find a suitable angle:

Anushka Patel ordered a large latte and a slice of carrot cake before she sat down. It was a relief to find that Dorningham's favourite actress and fitness fanatic was, after all, human.

In fact, this technique can be particularly well suited to handling interviews with well-known local sportsmen who are being interviewed outside their normal environment:

Fergus Miller paused briefly before adopting the lotus position. It was an incongruous sight. For a fraction of a second the extraordinary image was frozen, like a still photograph of the Dorningham United skipper pumping the ball upfield on a grey afternoon.

The moment passed and Fergus got up awkwardly. Perhaps he sensed the irony of the situation.

Case histories

In stories where we are using case histories to highlight a particular problem, a specific, straightforward, no-nonsense intro can sometimes get to the nub of the issue quite effectively.

On a good week, hospital porter Phil Low brings home just under £200 for 50 hours of shift work.

Person to person: 'involving' the reader

Sometimes it helps to spell out to readers how an issue affects them by drawing them into the feature with a more informal style. The feature below on junior doctors' working hours could have been tackled as a case history or as an eyewitness account of a typical night on the wards. Instead, the option chosen was to address the reader directly:

If you're rushed to hospital on a Monday afternoon with a fractured leg, don't be surprised if the young doctor at your bedside is looking red-eyed and careworn. He's probably been on duty or on call for the past 50 hours or more and is desperately looking forward to a good night's sleep.

In the meantime, he's likely to be dashing round the hospital corridors trying to find spare beds, picking up X-rays, attending to emergencies in the ward and making important decisions in a hurry.

Offbeat approach

There will be occasions, particularly when you are dealing with light-hearted or relatively inconsequential topics, when a more humorous or unconventional approach can make the subject more interesting.

Where do you keep all your car documents – in a tatty old folder covered in coffee stains or in several different places that you can never remember? Well, help is at hand thanks to a new Dorningham Start-up.

MotorCloud has created a new app that enables users to upload everything into one safe online space where they can also check the value of vehicles, renegotiate finance payments and search for the best available insurance premiums.

The company is growing rapidly and now has over 50,000 active users. CEO Mohammed Razak says the app is the 'wheel deal' and was fueled by a successful crowdfunding campaign just three months ago.

Storytelling approach

If you've got a good 'yarn' to tell, let it speak for itself – in chronological order, if that seems the most logical.

They were sent off to some of the most desolate peaks and moorlands in Scotland and told to capture every detail of the landscape for a new online map.

A kind of Mission Impossible, you might think. But for five solid months a team of workers were determined to record everything from the remotest of areas.

Covering up to 50 miles a day, they used a variety of vehicles to complete their task, from transits to tricycles and even underwater apparatus.

Then and now

For some nostalgia features – and profiles where interviewees are looking back over their careers, it may help to focus on the contrast between their current status and their early memories, experiences and aspirations.

As a schoolboy of 17, Freddy Campbell vowed that one day he would drive in the gruelling 2,500-mile Eurasia rally. It was 2003 and he had flown to Naples to watch the start of the race with his father. But it was to be 20 years before he realised his ambition and crossed the finishing line of the greatest sporting event in the motoring calendar.

Or:

Megan Barnett's first job was making tea and coffee for the staff of one of London's leading estate agents.

It was a two-week internship that she never expected would amount to very much but how wrong she was.

Now years later, Megan is a property millionaire with a huge portfolio in the south east of England, where she wants to build a new theme park.

The same approach can work even when the contrasts are rather more dramatic:

Jason was only in his mid-twenties when he was sentenced to 12 years imprisonment for manslaughter. Today he is living in Dorningham on parole – and trying to turn his back on the tragic incident that changed the course of his life.

Oddities and contradictions

You should keep a keen eye open for intriguing oddities or aspects of an interviewee's lifestyle which stand out as being unusual. Often it can give you an appealing intro – and in some cases there may be the added bonus of providing unexpected insights.

When Sandy and Lisa Staunton tell you they are off to weed the dining room or sweep out the cellars, you could be forgiven for thinking their household chores a little eccentric.

But the Stauntons expect to play host to 30,000 guests in the coming year – so their unusual routine plays a vitally important part in their lives.

The couple are the new keepers of the stunning clifftop ruin of Dorningham Castle – and they had to fight off competition from all over Britain to become custodians of the 14th century pile.

The 'right' choice?

Given the diversity of possible approaches to any particular subject, these examples at least clarify a few possible routes you could follow when faced with the prospect of putting those first words down on a blank sheet of paper.

To recap, we have looked at:

- 'global' implications
- human interest
- eyewitness accounts
- case histories
- involving the reader

- offbeat angles
- storytelling
- then and now
- oddities & contradictions

You won't be surprised to know that there is no definitive 'right' choice or combination of choices for any given set of circumstances. The challenge is to identify which approach is most appropriate to the subject and will have the most impact on the reader.

A news story about a parking row might lead to a fairly straightforward news feature in which we highlight the 'global' problem of parents blocking quiet residential streets when they drop off their children at school. Then, in the course of our research, we bump into eagle-eyed Jackie Smith, who's waging a one-woman war on the interlopers. Speaking to 70-year-old Jackie, we discover she's up at 7am every morning 'on patrol' – and personally haranguing every parent who dares to try and park on double yellow lines or in front of drives. Although she's clearly an extreme case and not representative of ordinary residents in the street, she succinctly (and vociferously) sums up their arguments and is taking 'direct action' to prevent anyone parking irresponsibly.

Faced with this kind of scenario, it's obviously tempting to use the specific image of feisty old Jackie getting up at dawn to wage war on the unsuspecting parents as the most intriguing way of grabbing our readers' attention and introducing the whole parking debate.

This is the way in which a feature can evolve as new facts come to light. And just in case anyone starts to think this is a rather far-fetched example, remember two things: (a) truth is stranger than fiction – the papers prove that every day; and (b) our nation appears to be populated by colourful, larger-than-life characters who make fantastic copy – and our job is to get out there and find them.

ASSIGNMENT TEN

Submit a 600-800 word feature profile of a local individual based on a face-to-face interview you have conducted. Include a short standfirst 'selling' your story to the reader (but don't forget to re-introduce your interviewee in the subsequent intro).

The person involved need not be a celebrity – or indeed well-known at all – but it should be clear from both the standfirst and the article why you consider the individual a suitable profile subject.