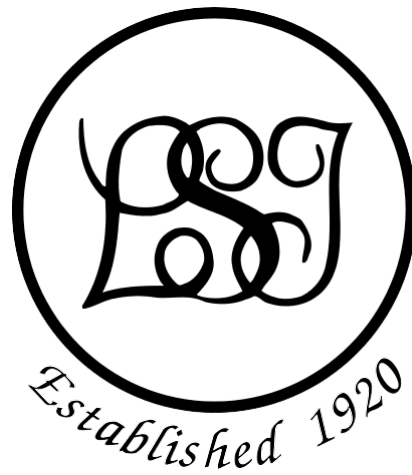


JOURNALISM AND NEWSWRITING



LESSON 9 Writing Features

© LONDON SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM

CHAPTER 9

WRITING FEATURES

What are features? Categorising features. News features. Why interview? Features structure and style.

WHAT ARE FEATURES?

Sooner or later you are likely to get the opportunity to write a full-length feature for your paper. This might come in the form of a news backgrounder commissioned by your news editor or a direct request from the features desk – possibly because they are short-staffed, perhaps because you have shown a general interest in that department, have demonstrated a particular flair for colourful writing or have developed a specialist knowledge of a particular subject.

It may be a long-cherished ambition to write such an article or a prospect that you dread; either way, you will want to grasp the opportunity enthusiastically, even if it is only to prove to yourself whether or not you have what it takes to be a feature writer.

Feature articles come in all lengths, styles and formats and deal with every conceivable subject, which makes it hard to find a simple, helpful definition of what they have in common. But if there is one word which best sums up what good features are all about, it is **insight**.

Whether your article is a personal profile or an analysis of a complex or controversial issue, you should be aiming to give your readers genuine insights into your chosen subject.

Be careful, though. Passing on such insights doesn't necessarily mean that your finished article has to be long, complex, esoteric or exhaustive. Structure, focus, style and approach are all-important – and that means building on many of the skills you have acquired while writing news stories.

Don't forget what you have learned about wasteful words, for example. A feature may deal with more complicated issues or go into subjects in greater depth than the average news story, but for it to remain clear, concise and comprehensible, your writing style should remain crisp and cogent.

There's more scope for background 'colour' than in a news story, of course, and more freedom to inject a little of your own personality. That's one of the reasons why feature writing is so rewarding. But don't make the mistake of thinking features are automatically long, or that they can be woolly, rambling, poorly thought-out or too writer-centred. A good feature should still incorporate lively, vigorous language, active verbs and the thoughtful use of quotes from experts and case studies. Indeed connecting with others key to the story to help shape and inform your article is every bit as important in feature writing as it is in news.

Brendan Hennessey wrote in his book *Writing Feature Articles* (Focal Press): *“Features are not as hard to write as a doctoral thesis, a ‘Dear John’ letter or a holiday postcard, but they are tricky. Unlike news stories, they rarely have an obvious beginning or an end. You want to be clear but you don’t want to be patronising. Humour is good but not silliness. The author’s personality should be visible but no one wants to be told they have written about themselves rather than their subject. Accuracy is important but so is the need to entertain, especially over longer lengths. So yes, each is a puzzle that needs to be solved, and in its own way. Yet a good feature is more satisfying than almost any other form of journalism.”*

And Harold Evans in *Editing and Design* (Heinemann 1972) made another point that is still valid several decades later: *“Most good news and feature leads have one thing in common: they are specific and human.”*

In newspapers, features serve a variety of purposes. They help to expand and explain news items, profile interesting people (who need not necessarily be celebrities), and put things in perspective. Over the years they have also increasingly strayed into magazine territory, dealing with lifestyle and consumer issues, film, TV and showbusiness and dealing with a plethora of special interest subjects like travel, motoring and technology.

Because they have a different writing style and pace from news stories, they serve another important function in ‘leavening’ the breathless diet of breaking news stories. A reader may be encouraged to ‘relax’ over a feature – there may be room for humour and controversy, for radical opinions or light-hearted perspectives on different aspects of our daily lives.

In terms of design and layout, features are often deliberately given extra prominence to make them stand out from surrounding news stories. And since readers are likely to skip a 1,000-word slab of grey type, a considerable amount of effort is put into presenting features in a dramatic and appealing way, with the imaginative use of pictures and a variety of other sub-editing devices from raised capitals to different headline types and engaging standfirsts (the introductory paragraph that often includes the writer’s by-line and explains what the feature is about). Similarly online features will be characterised by lots of images, a standfirst, drop cap and pull quotes.

From the writer’s point of view, features are fascinating territory. They provide more scope – and greater challenges – than news stories. The prominence they are usually given is also guaranteed to generate a warm glow of satisfaction. Unfortunately, good feature style is an elusive commodity and one which many reporters find almost impossible to attain. But that’s partly because there is very little features training within newspapers – perhaps stemming from an old-fashioned perception that feature writers are born, not made.

Don’t feel disheartened. If you remember the basics which you have already learned, constantly replenish your fund of ideas and always have a clear understanding of the market you are writing for, writing features can give you an enormous sense of satisfaction.

CATEGORISING FEATURES

You could sub-divide features into many different categories, but here are some of the most common 'types'. Some writers tackle a broad cross-section of different features, while others restrict themselves to a small but well-defined specialist area. As you read, try and think through which type of features interest you most. Do you have any specialist interests or knowledge? Do you tend to be interested in individual people or in understanding and explaining complex issues? What type of features do you most enjoy reading yourself?

- **News features** – Articles triggered or directly linked to stories in the news. These may take the form of expanding and explaining the impact topical stories of having on people's lives, work and businesses. For example if a news story is about a serious flood in a small town, a feature could examine how people directly affected are coping with the disaster. Sometimes these will be 'turned round' within a few hours – a regional paper editor may decide at the morning conference to get a writer to produce a relevant news feature for the website and tomorrow's paper. Articles which involve exploring a fresh 'angle' on a story – and those commissioned by magazines and Sunday papers – may remain topical for a much longer period of time and therefore have a longer 'shelf-life'.
- **Profiles** – One-to-one interviews remain enormously popular in both the local and national press, and in magazines. Subjects may be international celebrities or completely unknown local people who have an interesting story to tell.
- **Lifestyle features** – Traditionally popular in magazines, but today widely used by newspapers on women's pages, in special lifestyle sections and sometimes on general features pages.
- **Nostalgia features** – More popular in the local than the national press, but there is still a strong market for articles that recall a lost way of life or hark back to momentous events from the past. As with most features, you will still usually need to find a topical 'peg' to hang these on – linking in with a forthcoming anniversary, for example, or a local exhibition or school project.
- **Consumer features** – Popular with magazines and on lifestyle pages, these are perhaps best epitomised by the magazine *Which?* where considerable resources are allocated to comparing and assessing rival products. At a regional level, such articles might take the form of occasional 'taste tests' of a new (and possibly unusual) product, or a comparison of the costs and standards of service provided by local health clubs, bus operators and the like.
- **Question & Answer** – Interviews conducted and written in a Q&A format, where the interviewee simply answers a list of published questions without the writer interpreting or analysing the responses. Popular with women's magazines, who like asking celebrities offbeat questions about their favourite food or sexual preferences. Rare in newspapers, although occasionally used for high profile interviews – with a newly elected politician for example – to

give readers an unambiguous picture of the individual's views on a range of issues or an at-a-glance introduction to a personality in the news.

- **Specialist features** – These deal in some detail with specific subjects – travel, motoring, gardening, showbusiness, antiques, etc. These will often require some specialist knowledge or a strong personal interest in the area covered.
- **Reviews** – A specialist form of feature writing which demands a combination of analysis, interpretation and criticism. May involve theatre, TV, music, the arts, books, etc. On national papers, specialist knowledge and experience in the relevant area is expected. Regional newspapers and websites may welcome enthusiastic beginners, especially those dealing with niche interests. However do be aware that instant reactions on social media are undermining the traditional review and many publications have scaled down their review output.
- **Regular columns** – These range from weekly slots on specialist subjects to space provided for high-profile columnists to air their views on a subject of their own choice. However, this is an area often reserved for very experienced or veteran journalists with many years of experience under their belts.
- **Advertising features** – Sometimes generated by staff in a small specialist department, these are commercially orientated features specifically written to provide a platform for advertising. They may deal with general subject areas or directly relate to the activities of those companies advertising – a new garage franchise, for example, or a restaurant which is under new management.
- **Supplements/special projects** – One-off publications can cause all kinds of headaches to hard-pressed features editors. There may be opportunities to contribute to a special guide to what to do during the school holidays, a commemorative or anniversary supplement or a pull-out to celebrate the start of the new football season.

Subjects for features: It may help you to divide issue-based features into a series of broad categories – a little like Government departments – even if it's only to give you a few useful headings for your filing system. Add your own categories to the following:

- **Animals**
- **Consumer**
- **New business and entrepreneurship**
- **Significant anniversaries**
- **Education**
- **Environment**

- Family issues
- Housing and the property ladder
- Social media
- Law and order
- Leisure & entertainment
- Lifestyles
- ‘Triumph over adversity’ stories
- Politics
- Religion
- Technology
- Sport
- Transport

NEWS FEATURES

People and events in the news are a rich source of inspiration for newspaper and magazine writers and **topicality** will frequently have an enormous influence on an editor’s features agenda. Why? Because you are tapping into stories which may already have generated controversy, debate, intrigue or curiosity and editors are particularly anxious to publish stories with a new angle or twist that show their title is ahead of the field in identifying what people want to read about.

This doesn’t mean features writers are constantly chasing breaking stories against impossible deadlines before they go ‘stale’. There are a number of techniques for injecting topicality into articles which allow papers to set their own agenda. A little bit of lateral thinking also helps features writers to work at a more manageable pace.

News features tend to fall into one of two quite distinct categories: those that focus on **issues** and those that focus on **people**. And that means issues and people who are in the news – or about to be.

Issue-based news features tend to expand, explain and explore the background to controversial decisions, new trends, conflicts and debates. They may analyse confusing or contradictory subjects where there are two or more distinctive and opposing views.

They may examine the implications of someone’s actions – a council’s decision, a new Act of Parliament or a road-building scheme. In nearly all such cases, they will be written for the ‘ordinary’ reader, cutting through the jargon and technical waffle and presented in straightforward language everyone can understand.

Bear in mind, though, that not all ordinary readers are the same. The target audience for *Woman* is different from that of the *Daily Telegraph* or the *Sun* – and writers for those respective publications will need to adjust their style and approach accordingly.

Tackling such features demands the same kind of balanced approach you would adopt for a news story. You will usually need to find out all sides of the argument and put them in context. It is your job to interpret and analyse, but not normally to judge the rights and wrongs of the issue – let the people you interview do that, preferably in their own words, and leave the comment to the columnists and bloggers.

In writing an issue-based feature, you are usually more interested in what people have to say than in their personal idiosyncrasies or character traits. The exception is when their personality is directly relevant to the issue. But if you are writing about a straightforward difference of opinion – and especially when you are interviewing representatives of organisations – an individual's personal foibles are irrelevant. Let's say you've got an environmentalist to give their views in a debate over the local dumping of toxic waste. We only want to know their name and information which is relevant to how we interpret what they've got to say: are they an expert or a spokesperson, an activist or campaigner, scientist or eco-warrior? We don't need to know their hair colour, attitude, marital status or height.

Almost the reverse is true with **people-based features**. If we are interviewing someone whose controversial decision may dramatically affect our lives, the reader may well want to find out a wealth of personal information that helps put their decision in context. Is it an elder statesman with 40 years' experience under his belt, or a 30-year-old rising star keen to shake up the established order? An individual's background, beliefs and experiences may suddenly be very relevant to the debate – right down to their appearance, attitude and family circumstances.

Note that for a news feature we will tend to focus only on those personal characteristics that are relevant to the issue at hand, whereas an in-depth profile interview will take a much more wide-ranging look at an individual's lifestyle, interests, hobbies, family circumstances, influences, philosophy, etc.

The normal reason for opting for a people-based feature format is to **humanise** the story. Many articles which could have been tackled simply by using library files or getting the views of various officials, spokespeople and researchers can become a great deal more interesting and accessible if greater emphasis is laid on the human element.

Often the best way of humanising a complex issue is through **case studies**, where 'typical' individual experiences are used to illustrate a particular problem. A feature about a controversial pay dispute might therefore focus on the problem as seen through the eyes of a single family. Readers are better able to relate to the plight of the individuals involved and understand the reality of their situation if they are allowed to explain the issues in their own language. (TV viewers are familiar with this technique being used to humanise the actual impact of Budget decisions on ordinary people's lives).

If junior hospital doctors are campaigning against working over-long hours, it may be more effective to allow readers to see the problem through the bleary eyes of a weary medic rather than hearing a spokesperson explaining in theoretical terms why such long hours are potentially dangerous.

There are numerous occasions when you'll want to focus on how a particular group of people operate – **how the team ticks**, so to speak. It could be a fire crew, a sports team or the staff of a new hotel. In such cases, a straightforward phone interview with the boss is unlikely to give you a good sense of the atmosphere or what's actually involved. It's often better to see at first hand what the job involves and find out what different members of the team have to say.

Nostalgia features are often brought to life by individual first-hand accounts of a particular era or way of life, the personal recollections being used to supplement and add colour to library and research material.

The bald facts about a group of old pilots campaigning to restore a 1970s airplane might make dry and dusty reading – but their individual reminiscences about those heady days of the early jumbo might make riveting reading.

If you are unsure whether the people-based approach is likely to prove effective, ask yourself the following questions:

- does the feature need a stronger human angle?
- would a case study help put the whole issue in context?
- will personal reminiscences add colour to dry facts?

To produce a powerful news feature, you will need to have a very clear idea of the **angle** you are pursuing. Is your article simply exploring the background to a long-running row, or is it investigating a new dimension or perspective to the story that has been glossed over to date? Your initial preparations will involve deciding to whom you need to speak in order to obtain the information you are looking for. This may include those directly involved but may also extend to experts in the field who can provide an unbiased overview of the situation. If the experts disagree, you will need to reflect their conflicting views.

You will need to carry out considerable background **research**, although the precise amount involved will depend on the depth of the insights your finished feature is going to provide. In some cases, a cursory glance through all the relevant stories published to date may be sufficient as a starting point, whereas other features might involve reading a great deal about your chosen subject, or getting experts to explain the issues involved in simple language that you (and your readers) can understand.

Throughout this process, you will be looking to **firm up the facts**, identifying areas where all the parties involved are in agreement. You will then want to be able to spell out those issues upon which opinions diverge – using **direct quotes** to add colour, vigour, clarity and authority to your finished article.

You will need to be able to **adapt to changing circumstances** as new information comes to light which is likely to change the final slant or angle of your story. You will also need to develop the ability to **interpret information** and its relative weight and importance.

To write an authoritative article, it is simply not enough to juxtapose a long series of different views and isolated titbits of information. You need to restrict what you use to facts and opinions which are strictly relevant to the subject, sometimes reflecting the manner in which they are conveyed to you. Is an interviewee (or Government department) reluctant to speak about the issue? Do those involved appear blasé, arrogant, devious, high-handed? Any **subjectivity** of this type cannot be included on a whim, but backed up by hard evidence. *“Mr Brown this week was refusing to answer any calls, but finally issued a short statement through his lawyers stating that it was ‘inappropriate’ for him to make any comment about his company’s decision at this stage.”*

This is factual, but presented in a way which makes it clear to the readers that Mr Brown is extremely reluctant to talk about the issue – very different from simply being ‘unavailable for comment’.

WHY INTERVIEW?

You will already be aware that there can be huge differences in the amount of effort expended on individual features. At one end of the scale, a feature might involve a few minutes of research, a single straightforward interview and about 40 minutes’ worth of actual writing. At the other extreme, you might have to spend hours researching facts from a variety of sources, carry out a number of in-depth interviews, spend hours transcribing your notes and even longer crafting a concise 600-word article from the huge mountain of information you have amassed.

There’s no getting away from the fact that most features dealing with topical issues are going to involve multiple interviews, simply because there’s usually no one person who can give you a completely balanced insight into your chosen topic. There will be exceptions, but only rarely.

So why interview anyone? What’s the point? Wouldn’t it be a lot quicker just to gather all the facts you can from a variety of written sources and string them together? The simple answer is that the vast majority of such articles are deadly dull (or read like academic essays). Quotes from real people add vigour and vitality to your work. They vary the rhythm of the feature, making it easier to read. They add human interest, that vital ingredient in all stories. They also add credibility and authority. Experts may be able to explain a particular complexity in ten short words – and because they are experts, their words count more than yours.

Just as importantly, *interviews are what make your features unique*. Anyone could rehash information they have found online and cobble something together. But who you choose to speak to, what questions you ask them and how they respond on the day are factors which will set your article apart from anyone else’s. And give you greater ownership of it!

Single interviews

By their nature, profiles normally involve an extended individual interview. But for a news feature, is one interview ever enough? The answer is yes, occasionally. You know the importance of reflecting all sides of a debate. However, it is possible to produce legitimate features which only involve speaking to one key person – usually an individual, who has achieved something single-handedly, is an expert in their field or is a recognised representative for a wider group of people.

Such interviewees may be academics, authors, travellers, explorers or campaigners. They may have conducted ground-breaking research, ventured to a far-flung corner of the globe, made an exciting new discovery, written a controversial book or spearheaded a particular project. What they are likely to have in common is a particular expertise, experience, skill or knowledge that allows them to provide unique insights and speak with authority on their chosen subject.

It will often be acceptable for this sort of feature to be one-sided if it is providing a lot of new information to your readers and/or is creating a new agenda for a subsequent debate.

For example, if a local scientist is putting forward an intriguing new theory about global warming, we will want to hear his views in detail. It's not necessary at this stage to 'balance' the article by finding another expert to refute each point he makes.

But as professional writers we cannot afford to be naïve. We may need to ask some difficult questions which help to establish the credibility of our interviewee and put their views in perspective. There are other ways of balancing his views in the final article. For example:

McPherson knows that other scientists have poured scorn on her theory, but that doesn't worry her at all. "It will take time to win people over to my point of view," she admits. "I don't mind. I know I'm right and I'm not in any hurry."

If you are faced with the sort of news feature that might work as a single interview, you should ask:

- is the issue more important than the individual?
- will a single interview allow you to tell the whole story, or will the final feature appear unbalanced?
- would it be a **better** feature if more views were represented?
- should the finished feature be written as personal profile instead?

Two sides to the story

Arguments, debates and protests form the basis of countless news stories, but it's surprisingly rare to find a feature based on a conflict that can be handled straightforwardly, simply by speaking to the two sides who appear to be at loggerheads. That's partly because many rows are self-explanatory and don't justify features treatment. When they do, the issues involved tend not to be black and white, which means canvassing a wider cross-section of opinions.

Getting the whole picture

If you enjoy exploring contentious issues, this is the category for you. But to become an authority on your chosen subject, you may need to do a lot of background research and interview quite a few people.

Here, the interviews serve a double purpose. Firstly, they are the most direct and efficient way of getting a clear picture in your own mind of what's going on. Secondly, they provide you with the quotes that will bring clarity and vigour to your finished story.

This process needn't automatically be incredibly time-consuming. Often people will be able to put their views pretty succinctly, and you won't necessarily be looking for lengthy quotes, simply a couple of sentences summing up an individual's main concerns or key argument. If it's straightforward information you're after, or a brief response to a particular question, a phone call will be adequate. You'll only need to see people face to face if the issues are very complex, if you need to see something yourself to understand it better or if you need background 'colour' that can only be picked up first hand.

This contrasts sharply with people-based features, which are very hard to write effectively unless you can actually look your subject in the eye.

The drawback of more complex features is that new writers find that it can be hard to see the wood for the trees. You will be probably be collating, analysing and organising a fair amount of information and, doing that quickly and efficiently, is one of the fundamental skills of a professional features writer. They make it look disarmingly easy: one minute they're asking a few casual questions, the next they're churning out a finely crafted, erudite 800-word article that sums up the issue in a nutshell.

Vox pops

You will all have seen vox pops (*from the Latin 'vox populi', or voice of the people*) used on news pages in both the local and national press. This is a useful way of getting the view of the man and woman on the street and usually involves a series of one-paragraph soundbites from a cross-section of people on a particular subject, with small head shots of all those interviewed.

In some papers, this has become a daily feature, with a topical question – sometimes weighty, sometimes trivial – fired at a set number of individuals. Feature writers can also find vox pops useful from time to time – particular when there is a need to include ordinary people's views as an antidote to the somewhat high-flown claims of the experts. This is especially true of contentious issues. It's all very well the local councillor or MP claiming they are speaking on behalf of their constituents, but sometimes it's interesting to put their claims to the test.

Vox pops may also be useful in analysing the potential impact of decisions, either on the public at large or specific target groups. Vox pops are easy to conduct, although if you're of a shy disposition, it's a marvellous confidence-booster to have a staff photographer standing beside you when you're approaching people in the street.

Email interviews

Many organisations and individuals who claim to be short on time and availability might suggest you conduct your interview by email. While this may be convenient and even attractive for the writer in terms of simply cutting and pasting the responses directly into the piece without the painstaking and time-consuming task of transcribing an interview, the results are not always satisfactory. The subject, with the luxury of time, may over-think their answers, resulting in the interview appearing manufactured and bland. There is no substitute for a live interview where more spontaneous answers allow the writer the opportunity to ask supplementary questions. This is not possible when a list of carefully constructed answers arrive in the writer's inbox.

FEATURES STRUCTURE & STYLE

The way you structure a feature and the writing style you adopt are two crucial factors that will, to a large extent, determine your success in this field of journalism. Both skills are difficult to teach because there is no straightforward, easily defined formula that will produce a winning result every time. Features deal with the most diverse range of subjects imaginable, and different newspapers and magazines often have conflicting demands.

Structure

Features aren't news stories and aren't constructed in the same way – with the possible exception of feature exposés, which are, in effect, in-depth news stories. You have learned how most news stories start with the most important new development and answer the questions 'Who, What, When, Where, Why?' almost immediately. They have intense, dramatic intros for maximum impact and then gradually fill in increasing amounts of background information. Their ideal length is defined by how much each story is 'worth' – a rather woolly concept for new writers to grasp, particularly as this varies widely from title to title.

Most news stories are potentially of universal interest. Ninety per cent of all readers are likely to start reading the front page splash in a newspaper, for example, although very few will read the story right through to the final paragraph.

Features are different. Any particular feature is likely to appeal to a smaller percentage of a publication's overall readership – those who are interested in horses, perhaps, those who care about nurses' pay or those interested in a profile interview with a soap star.

The sub-editor's aim, of course, is to design the page in such an appealing way as to attract the maximum number of readers – using all the devices at their disposal (headline, standfirst, pictures etc.) to draw readers in. But inevitably the audience is restricted by a number of factors – to those who have time to read a full-length feature, as well as those who may be interested in the specific subject.

With this in mind, features need to be more thoughtfully structured than news stories. There may be fewer people in the audience, but those readers are more committed

and more likely to read through to the end, which means you need to present them with a coherent package.

Intros should still have impact, but not the same breathless, clipped quality of a breaking news story. You will still need to answer the **Five W** questions during the course of your article, but not necessarily as quickly as in a news story. Because you are covering more ground, you will need a clear sense of **focus** to avoid getting distracted and taking your reader up a blind alley or confusing them with irrelevancies. You will probably have collected a large number of quotes and a huge amount of background information.

It's vital you have a clear sense of direction before you start writing, or you won't have a clue what to put in and what to leave out.

A **good ending** is also vital. Your reader has been sufficiently loyal and interested in what you've got to say to stay with you for 800 words – don't let them down by allowing your article to fizzle out like a damp squib. Having said that, the vast majority of features end on a quote, so try to save a strong, pertinent one for the ending, if that's how you want to conclude it.

Now consider the raw material you have gathered in the course of researching your feature. This will fall into three main categories:

- **Facts** – from your background research and interviews
- **Quotes** – from the people you have spoken to
- **'Colour'** – your own observations and impressions of people and places.
And do bear in mind these should be *observations* as opposed to *opinions*.

In writing your feature, you may draw on each of these elements, seamlessly merging them into an integrated whole.

You can't afford to throw in facts and quotes at random and, if you monotonously work through every small detail you have been told in chronological order, your feature will be too long – and incredibly boring. The first step, naturally, is to **select** what material you are most likely to use in the finished article.

Start with the **facts** since they are likely to provide you with the skeleton of your story. What do you know and what does the reader need to be told? In what order should you present the information?

Once you've jotted down the key facts, see if you can pair up any of these with good **quotes** which illustrate the point being made, clarify one person's stance or add weight and credence to the factual information.

If you need to reflect both sides of an argument or there are several different views which need to be reflected, consider whether you need to group these quotes fairly closely together – making sure you don't get your interviewees muddled up in the process. Similarly, you will need to decide where and when to introduce a little **'colour'** – what have you witnessed yourself that is relevant to the argument or adds a different nuance to a bare fact or quote?

Even when your rough outline starts taking shape, the hardest part will probably be knowing where to start. But don't spend a long time staring at a blank sheet of paper. Try and get a **draft intro** of some kind down – you can always go back and tidy it up later.

Features should **flow** – they shouldn't be as staccato as many poorer news stories are, with a series of facts and quotes stapled together with a few overworked conjunctions (*and*, *but* and *for* being the most popular). Different ideas should also be presented in a **logical** progression. Don't flit from subject to subject like a butterfly – make sure that any significant arguments are fully developed before moving on to your next theme.

To achieve all this, you will need to be able to switch effortlessly between direct and indirect speech and ensure your writing retains its vigour and pace. And that's where features style comes in...

Style

Half the battle in developing a good readable features style is getting the structure right. Once you have a clear outline of the skeleton of your article, the words will flow much more naturally.

Don't worry too much at this stage about finding your own 'voice' – that will emerge in due course as you feel increasingly familiar with the writing process.

There are a few pitfalls to avoid, all of them familiar to you by now:

- **wasteful words and phrases (padding)**
- **clichés and jargon**
- **complex or specialist words (often with Latin or Greek roots)**
- **repetition**

Before you start writing, you should know in your own mind whether the purpose of your article is to **entertain** as well as inform. This will help you gauge whether the finished piece should have a light, humorous touch or if the subject matter is so serious that this would be entirely inappropriate. How much **analysis** is expected of you? To what extent should you **interpret** information that is given to you, as opposed to presenting the facts in a very straightforward, non-judgmental way?

Only the features editor who has given you the assignment can help guide you on delicate matters such as what **tone** you should adopt, although if you are familiar with the feature output of your own publication you will probably already have a good idea of exactly what is required.

Unless you have been specifically requested to produce a particularly high-flown, offbeat, witty or satirical piece of writing, you will be wise to avoid **purple prose**. A common fault of first-time feature writers, this is basically the temptation to get so carried away by the excitement of writing a longer article that you pad it full of expansive phrases, overblown or outdated language and inappropriate flights of fancy.

It is probably better to start with a more subdued style that is at least accurate and carefully structured. You may then consider incorporating some of the devices feature writers use to give their articles character and depth. Some of these are fairly obvious. In a news story, you have been told that putting the words “he said” or “said Mr Green” after a direct quote are perfectly adequate in most cases.

Just because you are writing a feature, you should resist the temptation to jettison this simple approach by including a plethora of words like “he enthused” and “she opined”, or clumsy and repetitious inversions: “Commenting on the fact that the figures had just been released, he said...”

Equally, since you are likely to be using more direct quotes than the average news story, it will sound pretty repetitious if you inject the words “he said” or “he added” at the end of each paragraph.

You can get round this by using longer, uninterrupted quotes (as long as it is obvious who is speaking) or preceding a quotation with a descriptive phrase that helps put it in context (again, as long as it is clear who is speaking):

Cummings fiddles nervously with his phone while he considers the question. When he finally answers, there is still a distinct reticence in his voice at the idea of discussing such intimate matters. “I don’t know that you could really call it an affair. We knew each other for ten years before there was any physical contact between us. But we both knew that the relationship we had was very special.”

Injecting ‘colour’ gathered from your own observations is particularly useful in crafting a lengthy profile piece where only one person is speaking throughout. In such examples, there may be reasonably lengthy quotes carried in full, without any form of interruption.

This is perfectly acceptable, particularly when someone is recounting a particular story or reminiscence.

Variety is always the key to a successful features approach, whether in the way you juxtapose direct speech with indirect speech, or in the way you vary the length of your sentences. Prose which relies entirely on extremely short clipped sentences of almost identical lengths quickly becomes staccato and unpalatable to read, as well as underestimating the reader’s capacity for comprehension.

Checklist

When attempting to assess the success of your own or other people’s features, it may help to answer some of the following questions:

- is there a clearly identifiable **angle**?
- does the feature contain genuine **insights**?
- does the article **flow** and demonstrate a **logical** progression of ideas?
- how well does it combine **observation**, **background information** and **quotes**?

- does it contain elements of **intrigue**, **drama**, **colour** or **revelation**?
- does it have an attention-grabbing **intro**?
- does it have a well-rounded **ending**?
- does it ask – and answer – all the right **questions**?
- does it use language **imaginatively**?
- if appropriate, does it contain **humour** or **analysis**?
- is the **tone** appropriate to the subject matter?

Where to find them?

Of course devouring as many features as you can and reading them actively and not passively will help you become more familiar with their style and content. The first step though is to identify them and distinguish them from news stories. That is not as easy as you may think. Printed publications, particularly broadsheets will place many features in their daily supplements or weekend magazines. Tabloids and local dailies and weeklies may put them anywhere but they are more likely to be in the middle or back of the 'book'. It is much more difficult to locate them online as they are not always clearly signposted. Better then to invest in a printed copy whether through an app or the local newsagent.

ASSIGNMENT NINE

Study two recent feature articles, one published in a national newspaper or website and one in a local/regional paper – one a news feature, the other a personal profile – and provide a short appraisal of their strengths and weaknesses (maximum 250 words on each).

The articles or web references must be included with this lesson so please make sure you do not use websites with a paywall. The following questions may help focus your thoughts in each case.

- Did you enjoy reading the article? Is this the sort of feature you might normally read?
- Did you feel the article gave you a genuine insight into the issue or personality featured? If so, how was this achieved?
- Did you enjoy the writing style? Which aspects of the writing did you admire?
- Do you think the writer asked the right questions? Were they adequately answered?
- Was the article well structured? Did it convey a logical progression of ideas?
- To what extent – and how well – did the article combine background information with direct quotes and personal observation?
- Did the intro grab your attention? How well did the ending round off the article?