

Lesson 4.1 -- Writing A Feature Story

What's a feature? The basic scoop:

A news feature goes way deeper than the headlines – it explores an issue thoroughly. To write one requires plenty of research and interviewing. Yes, it takes some honest toil to create something worthwhile, but it's fun – especially once you see the result of all that hard work.

What to feature in a feature?

Features can run up to 10,000 words in length. Even if your story is only one tenth as long (YPP features tend to be from 1000-1500 words in length), it's important to have a clear idea of what you are going to write about – and what specific angle you will explore – as you get started.

Story mapping can keep you from wasting a lot of time doing research that you won't be able to use. Here's an example of how to focus a feature by using the technique of story mapping. We'll look at raves once again:

You love raves, and want to do a story on them. OK, cool, **you've got your initial idea**. But what exactly are you going to write about? ***For every general story idea, there are many angles, or ways the story can be handled.*** For instance, a story about raves could address the drugs, the venues, the music, the dangers, the police, parents, the rave culture, clothing, trends...the list goes on and on. If you try to cover everything, you will have zero focus. Without a clear angle, the likely result after lots of hard work will be one big mush!

Narrow your idea down to a few main sub-topics. Choose sub-topics that relate logically, and you will find it easier to focus your story. For example, to write a feature on raves, you might choose to focus on drugs, recent trends and music.

Your next step is to **brainstorm as many angles as you can within each sub-topic**, the same way you did the main story idea. What possible details are there to touch upon?

Break down drugs: The physical effects, the peer pressure, the prices, the quality, the testing process, bad trips, the potential for dying, for getting busted.

Break down trends: What's cool in the scene and what's not? What's the future? Are raves becoming too trendy? Is there a dominant style? How do trends relate to the kinds of drugs people take?

Break down music: What's hot? What's not? What are the different styles and scenes? What kind of equipment is used? Who are famous DJs? What is house? Techno? Happy Hardcore? Trance?...

Based on the angles you come up with, decide what the main angle for your story is. The rave story's main focus could be to explain the rave scene through the eyes of a DJ who has been around for a while, and has seen various drugs and trends come and go.

Suddenly, you have an interesting story about raves waiting to happen. It's straightforward, and will be relatively easy to write because you know where you want to go, and what types of information you need to take you there.

What's next?

As always, you need to become an expert in your subject. Go out and get the information. You will need to do some research on the net or in a library, talk to people on the phone and set up your key face-to-face interviews.

A reporter has to hustle to get their facts straight. Find a DJ to profile and set up an interview. Go to some raves, check out the trends; what are people wearing and taking? Take notes. Go to rave wear stores and get prices. Figure out how to talk to some designers. What are the latest rumors about drugs? Who's doing what and why? Make sure you interview some ravers so you can ground your story through their first-hand voices. Youth journalists should strive to represent youth perspectives as often as possible.

The entire time you are doing your research, **REMEMBER TO KEEP YOUR FOCUS.** Keep asking yourself what information you really need. When you get extra information (which you most certainly will), don't get bogged down and distracted by it. If you stay true to your focus, you will spend your time and energy doing research efficiently. Once you've got all the information you need to cover your chosen angles, then transcribe your tapes (if you record interviews) and notebooks.

It's Time to Write!

Are you ready to get funky? Features are the crown jewel of news stories, where you can use colourful language and have some freedom to express yourself. Whereas hard news stories concentrate on the facts – just the facts – news features blast past those limitations. This is where you get to show off and be creative as a writer. **Test your limits, push your use of language and your ability to set a scene.** You are the Storyteller now.

There's no one right way to write, and there's no single best way for you to tell your story, so **trust yourself**...insist on coming up with an original and effective approach. The more work you put into story development and research, the more you can go with the flow of your notes when you actually sit down and write the feature.

Try to make your reader feel like they are there. *Your writing can trigger all five senses!*

You can think of a feature story as a series of mental images, presented one after the other. If these scenes are developed thoughtfully, creatively and skillfully, they can come together in extraordinary ways to create a beautiful montage.

Consider the story about raves. A great feature will put the reader **INSIDE** the club, next to the DJ (what does s/he look like, smell like, sound like...does s/he wear their headphones crooked on their head, or around their neck), in the mind of a 17 year-old taking "E," make them feel the music washing over the swaying crowd, connect the trends they learned about with the outfits of the dancers gyrating by.

What's the point of your story?

In a feature, you have some room to develop your ideas and your characters (much like in a play or a short story). You **don't** have to start with a lead that summarizes the whole piece.

If you create a vivid atmosphere for your readers, it can be very effective to have your characters narrate the story from within that scene.

Say the rave story starts off right in the heart of a club: the lights, the beats, the gear, the heat, the turntables. The description ends with the turntables, and the DJ takes over telling the story in his/her own words. By sharing some details about other aspects of the club, and quoting other ravers and DJs, the whole feature can unfold within the atmosphere of the party. **Just be sure that whatever approach you use allows you to stay with the initial idea and main sub-topics.**

Your role as a feature writer is that of narrator. You take all the pieces of information that you've assembled and decide how to put them together. Build a complete jigsaw puzzle, using your own perspective to envision and then assess the final result.

Remember that your opinions shouldn't enter a feature story. You are there to fairly and accurately represent different people, and to let the reader draw their own conclusions about who and what to believe.

Lesson 4.2 -- Re-Vision And Editing

Always reread your work. Read it out loud; read it as if you have no knowledge of the subject; pretend you are a critical editor seeing it for the first time; pretend you are one of your targeted readers. Do your own grammar and spell check. **If possible, let it sit for a couple days and then read it again.** This is the beauty of re-vision: you'll be amazed by all the improvements you can make when you look at it with a fresh perspective. Also, consider printing it out and reading it as printed text, because things read differently on paper than they do on screen.

It sucks to have words that you sweated and slaved over deleted with the click of a button, but editing – and cutting in particular – almost always has to happen. Though you need to try and edit yourself as ruthlessly as possible, it's almost impossible to have an editor's perspective when you are the author. It helps to hear someone else suggest what passages they think aren't crucial, what sentences need to be tightened up, where there's clutter that can be eliminated.

It can be incredibly hard to see your writing cut up, but that, after all, is why editors exist. The lesson to be learned when it comes to dealing with editors is to **cultivate a thick skin**. To master the craft of writing you have to discipline yourself to hear criticism without construing it as a personal attack. If your piece of writing is too long (as most are, once you're trying to squeeze into a word count allotted to you by a publication), then something *has* to be cut. You may not like it, but you have to accept it.

Of course, you must struggle to find a balance; as the author you are ultimately responsible for keeping the heart of your story intact...alive...vibrant! So you can't accept every suggested revision, but you also can't stake your feelings to every sentence you've ever written. Not if you want to be a published writer.

When your piece appears in print, don't be surprised if you find changes have been made to your story that you've never seen. Again, don't take it personally when your work is revised. Sometimes it's done to better suit the style of the publication. Sometimes it's minor grammar alterations. And sometimes there's such major cutting, pasting and rewording that it's hard to recognize your story anymore. When this happens, don't scream and threaten your editor. Calmly express your concerns at an appropriate time, and if the editor isn't willing to accommodate you and you don't want it to happen again, don't submit anything else to that publication.

HINT: If you get sick and tired of reading over your own piece during the revision process, show it to a friend. They will see things that you can't – guaranteed!

Activity 4.1 -- Understanding A Feature

Find a feature and read it carefully. What is the feature about, in your own words...the main, focused idea?

Cite three major sub-topics, or angles, used to explore aspects of the main idea.

1.

2.

3.

For each of the above three sub-topics, cite one piece of evidence the author includes as support. Hint: look for facts or quotes.

1.

2.

3.

Cite two sentences where the author uses descriptive, evocative language.

1.

2.

List three people that the story quotes, and why they are qualified to serve as appropriate references and sources of authority.

1.

2.

3.

Cite the sentence that you think is weakest. Hint: Look for something that either reveals the author's personal opinion, or that is unrelated to the main focus of the story.

1.

Comment on something you like about the writer's style.

1.

Lesson 4.2 -- Story Generation: Brainstorming

There are many stages to writing a story for a newspaper, and a good reporter is good at shifting gears as they tackle the different kinds of work required.

Doing research and conducting interviews calls for a left-brained mind like a steel trap, tracking details and thinking very rationally. However, before you reach that stage of the game, you should already have tapped into the right side of your brain and made good use of your creativity.

Story mapping is a great way to generate your own overview of the story you want to write. Try this exercise in the first steps of story mapping to help get your creative juices flowing.

What are some general ideas for stories that you could write about? List at least three.

Settle on one of the ideas, and cross out the others. Now, brainstorm sub-topics and ideas or things that relate to your main idea. Write down as many angles that relate to your story as you can come up with.

List the three or four important related ideas from the above list, and then repeat the brainstorming process: try to come up with as many sub-topics for each of them as you can.

Write down three people or organizations you could contact in order to get quotes or information that would address important sub-topics you have brainstormed.

What is one sub-topic you came up with that you think should not be included in your story because it shifts the focus to a different angle?

What is the most important sub-topic you have found – the one that you think will be a (or the) major theme in your story.

Reading 4.1 – Feature

“Air Carter,” by Afrodite Balogh-Tyszko and Anika Jarrett

Mean dunks. Dirty, grimy dunks. Blood-curdling, rim-rocking, crowd shocking dunks. Dunks that are completely unfathomable until you witness one.

Yes, this is basketball – “Air Canada” style. And Raptor fans have rookie sensation Vince Carter to thank for all the hoop-la.

Carter, 22, has helped lead the struggling expansion team out of the woods and into playoff contention. Each night, he pulls a new trick out of his well-equipped bag and elevates the game to a new zenith in Toronto.

The former North Carolina Tar Heel is a bona fide crowd pleaser, but his flashiness comes naturally to him. While he is sometimes referred to as “Air Canada,” he is simply incomparable.

High-flying dunks aside, Carter has the makings of a complete player. He is a fierce competitor and inside the paint, he can make an opposing player look dumb and dumber. Give him the ball and watch things happen! He can soar over a defender but he has also got the court vision of a guard who will selflessly pass the ball to open teammates.

Carter says he doesn't have a specific style. “I don't really have a patent move,” he remarks. “(Perhaps) the fade away, I guess. I use that a lot, but eventually good teams will catch on.”

One thing is for certain. Once Carter takes flight within the perimeters of the key, he is virtually untouchable.

As much as his on-court athleticism distinguishes him as a prime candidate for Rookie of the Year honours, as a young pro with a champion's heart and veteran's demeanour Carter is an ambassador of good will and hard work both on and off the court.

Playing ball, he combines his remarkable basketball skills with a tremendous sense of fair play and modesty – qualities which have led to his winning the “Most Sportsmanlike Player” honours for the Central Division. Off the court, Carter is careful to avoid the trappings of celebrity – the fast-paced life of the young, handsome and wealthy – choosing instead to lead a quiet existence between games.

“(The NBA) is tough,” says the young superstar. “You have to learn how to take care of your body and to get rest. A lot of players don't do that.”

Despite the tremendous rigors of the NBA schedule, Carter has chosen to volunteer what little free time he has as a role model and mentor to a select group of Toronto youth, the participants in the “Vince's Hoop Group” program. The program is an extension of his “Embassy of Hope Foundation,” based in his hometown of Daytona Beach, Florida.

“I'm all about putting smiles on young kids' faces,” says Carter. “As soon as I got drafted I started the organization.”

Carter selected Westview Centennial Secondary School in North York as the home for his program because he was impressed with the school's unique approach to motivating students and its strong links to the community.

Students who take part in "Vince's Hoop Group" are asked to set and meet challenging goals. The reward for fulfilling these objectives is silver seats to a Raptor home game at Carter's personal expense and the opportunity to meet and chat with the young star.

"We had to have regular attendance, raise our marks, and be positive role models in the school," explains Jermaine Brown, 15. "I'm here because I did all that and I'm glad to have been involved."

While meeting with students, Carter emphasizes the importance of a good education and tells the participants that he is proud of their accomplishments and that they should be too.

The young basketball star's message to these students, and to youth in general, is to take school seriously. "Learn how to study," he asserts. "It will mean a lot later on in college." Carter also encourages youth to get involved in volunteer work. "It never hurts to go out and do something in your community."

Teachers involved with "Vince's Hoop Group" couldn't be happier with Carter's enthusiasm. "Sometimes there's only so much we as teachers can do to motivate our students," says Westview physical education teacher Peter Stefaniuk. "I'm especially happy about Vince Carter serving as a role model for this program because he not only has fantastic basketball skills which scores him pretty high on the 'cool' scale with kids, but he seems to be very well rounded and have a real sense of integrity. Certainly, good footsteps for our students to follow in."

Spending a few choice moments with Carter could be enough to send some youth back out on to the basketball court dreaming of the big leagues, but his advice seems to have rubbed off on the starry eyed youngsters.

"I want to play in the NBA," says 15-year-old Dwight James. "But right now, school comes first and I want to get into business. Maybe I'll become a bank manager."

James' teammate Brown has similar goals. "If not the NBA," he says, "I want to get into accounting."

Carter practices what he preaches. He is soaring to reach his goals, but has both feet planted firmly on the ground.

"Basketball means a lot to me," he says, "but it's not everything. If I wasn't doing what I'm doing, I'd probably be at a (historical) Black college."

The Raptor rookie couldn't be happier with where he is right now. Perhaps his real patent move, both on and off the court, is his vibrant smile, which has warmed the hearts of millions.

It shows that he is a young man who is relishing every minute of his exciting life.

Afrodite Balogh-Tyszko, 19, attends St. Martin's Secondary School in Mississauga. Anika Jarrett, 18, attends Pickering High School in Ajax.