

THEMES *In* COMMUNICATION *Writing*

A hand holding a quill pen, writing on a document. The background is a textured, reddish-brown surface with a white scalloped border.

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WRITING FEATURE ARTICLES

INTRODUCTION

Feature is one of the newspaper contents through which the functions of mass media are performed. Generally, print media content can be classified into four groups. They are: news, comments, advertisements and fiction. News as a genre of print media consists of straight news, feature and picture news. Comments include editorials, opinion articles, cartoons and letters to the editor. Advertisements consist of advertorials and supplements; while Fiction consists of short stories, poems, riddles etc.

By these genres, the print media perform its functions of surveillance (news/information function), correlation (interpretation/opinion function), entertainment, cultural transmission, social mobilization, economic

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integration and national integration among others. Though straight news and feature belong to the same genre, they are not the same. Features are not meant to deliver the news firsthand. They do contain elements of news, but their main function is to humanize, to add colour, to educate, to entertain, to illuminate. They often recap major news that was reported in a previous news cycle. Feature is a comprehensive account of events that are gone by. It is a bridge between hastily written news stories and carefully compiled analysed materials. It is an in-depth and factual write-up on a topical issue which seeks to give comprehensive information in a more captivating and relaxed style than straight news (Okoye 1998). While straight news emphasizes the facts of the event, feature displaces the facts to accommodate the human interest of the story.

While straight news is a timely report following a happening of an event, feature is a little delayed. The timeliness of straight news does not allow a comprehensive report so it is always brief; but because feature is delayed a little, it allows for the gathering of additional information to the issue being reported and thus making an in-depth, detailed report. Besides, straight news comes in piece meals; that is, in bits, but feature is more complete because most details of that report would have been gathered before it is written. (Folarin, 1998). In addition, straight news is businesslike in nature, it goes ahead and tells the story right away, feature is more relaxed and expository. The language of straight news is selective but that of feature is more colourful, allowing a generous use of flowery language. Feature also permits the coverage of diverse kinds of issues which may be considered as too trivial for straight news. Slang in a palm-wine drinking joint may not appeal for a space in straight news but can be a good subject matter for a feature page.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- ❖ Explain what a feature article is
- ❖ Differentiate feature from straight news and comments
- ❖ Identify sources of feature ideas

- ❖ Explain the qualities of a good feature writer
- ❖ Discuss types of feature articles
- ❖ Explain the steps involved in writing feature, and
- ❖ Write a publishable feature article

CHAPTER OUTLINE

- Distinguishing Feature from Comments
- Feature Desk in the News Organisation
- Sources of feature Ideas
- Qualifications of a Feature Writer
- Types of Feature Articles
 - Feature Writing Process
- General Tips for Feature Writing
- Flaws to Avoid

DISTINGUISHING FEATURE FROM COMMENTS

Newspaper comments include the editorial, opinion articles, editorial cartoons and letters to the editor. They are subjective because they are personal judgment of the newspaper organization and individuals. They are one-sided account based on the perspective of the writer. Feature on the other hand is devoid of personal opinion. It is based on facts and thorough analysis of every side of an issue. Instead of making judgment, it bares the anatomy of an event to the readers and allows them to make their own judgment.

Features often perform the following functions:

- Summarizing the important news of the week.
- Deal with the areas not usually covered by straight news.
- Profile people who make the news.
- Explain events that move or shape the news and gives better understanding of that event to the readers.
- Analyze what is happening in the world, nation or community.
- Teach an audience how to do something and explain a process.
- Suggest better ways to live.

- Examine trends.
- Provide entertainment.
- Facilitate make-up and enrich the publication.

FEATURE DESK IN THE NEWS ORGANISATION

The feature editor oversees the feature desk. He is one of the line editors responsible to the daily editor. Other line editors in newspaper organisation include news editor, sports editor, women editor and production editor. There may be other lesser editors such as health editor, education editor, political editor, etc., the number of line editors is determined by the size of the news organization.

The feature desk initiates ideas for feature write-ups, allocates them to writers, edits the scripts and plans the feature page. It also ensures that appropriate illustrations in form of photographs, sketches or cartoons are used along with the feature articles.

SOURCES OF FEATURE IDEAS

One responsibility of the feature desk is to generate feature ideas to write on. This is no simple task which involved a lot of deep thinking and brain cracking. However, ideas for feature can come from a number of sources which include the following among others:

- ❖ Striking news of the day
- ❖ Topical news which may not be in the day's news
- ❖ Special seasons and festive occasions
- ❖ National days, remembrance days and May days
- ❖ United Nations special days
- ❖ Serious issues in the societies
- ❖ Birthdays and deaths of national heroes
- ❖ Unsung heroes
- ❖ National institutes and monuments
- ❖ Historical places

QUALITIES OF A GOOD FEATURE WRITER

The interpretative nature of feature writing requires that a feature writer possess more than the basic qualities of a normal journalist. He needs analytical and creative abilities to excel in his job. A feature writer needs to possess the following qualities among others:

- **A nose for news:** This involves the ability of the feature writer to be sensitive to information that makes for good and interesting feature story. In other words, he/she should be able to recognize those important issues that will interest the readers of feature articles.
- **Resourcefulness:** A good feature writer takes all the pain to go extra mile in unearthing all that is needed to make a good story. Many times, there will be stumbling blocks to getting all the information needed, but a resourceful feature writer is so committed to pursue his course against all odds in order to meet the needs of his readers.
- **Love of public service:** Willingness to serve is one quality of a good feature writer. This drives him/her to provide all that will make readers live a better life by providing necessary information for that purposes.
- **Analytical mind:** A feature writer should be able to reason logically, differentiate facts from opinions and present arguments convincingly. He or she has the responsibility to present all the sides to an issue in order to enable the readers form the right opinion and take the right decisions.
- **Creativity:** He or she must be original in the application of style as to carve a niche for him or her self through maintenance of a distinctive style. His expression must show imagination and innovation.
- **Research ability:** A feature writer must be able to dig out information for the reading audience. The various sources of information available must be explored so as to give adequate information to the readers.

- **Good writing skills:** This is very fundamental to feature. A good feature writer must master the intricacies of writing to the minutest details. His expressions must both be grammatically and structurally correct and communicative.

TYPES OF FEATURE ARTICLES

News Feature

This is an extension of news earlier reported. It seeks to expand the thought of the news by giving all its details that were hitherto unknown. It is therefore a little delayed since some research is needed to get all the fact concerning the issue. The news story from which the idea emanated is called the news peg. The feature writer elaborates on the news peg, giving additional background information and side attraction that will enable readers to get a broader outlook of the situation (Harcup 2004). It must be written in a relaxed and colourful style that will make it less formal and more interesting to read than straight news report.

Profile

This is built around important or interesting personalities, organizations or places. It gives an intimate knowledge about the subject matter of the personality or place being discussed. A personality profile is usually shaped around a theme for the purpose of elaborating, explaining the personality's involvement in that theme. These personalities always have outstanding features that should be shared. Such features may include age, occupation, unusual accomplishment, handicap etc.

In writing a personality profile, the theme must be well stated, so that only the personality's life related to the theme is included. The writer should research and dig out fresh facts about the personality and jettison stories that are already over-publicised and known. The biographical summary of the personality will be of good material to the profile writer. Profile can also be written on unfamiliar persons. This kind of article is written either for its human interest value or to redress an injustice, e.g. an handicap who did something that deserves credit; a four-week old baby

who has cancer of the eye etc.

Profile on organizations and places give information on origins, structure and operations of such places; as well as significant events concerning them. Three categories of places can be written about.

(a) Historical Places/Events e.g. Jebba, where Mungo Park was buried, Olumo rock in Abeokuta, the first storey-building in Nigeria (Badagry) or the second storey-building in Ota, Lisa-where the Bellview air craft crashed etc.

(b) Contemporary familiar places e.g. air-ports, public buildings (Cocoa house), stadia, universities, churches/mosques, etc.

(c) Obscure places e.g. Okija shrine, koma Hills, place where human parts are sold, etc.

It is necessary to tie any of these profiles to an important occasion or date; and take the story from a fresh, interesting angle not already known. Individuals who are associated with the important places should also be mentioned to make it interesting.

Expose or Alarmer

This is a feature type that exposes or points out something wrong in the society. It deals with subjects like prostitution, examination malpractices, secret cultism, smuggling, bribery and corruption, drug trafficking, armed robbery etc. It is always difficult to obtain information on this type of article however; using observation, informants, tribunals or investigation panels' records can still make successful efforts. Any or combination of these methods will help in getting information.

When writing alarmer, you need to protect the identity of the informant; that is part of the ethical obligation of the feature writer. As a participant observer, inform the police ahead so that they would be aware of your role and thus avoid possible embarrassment and punishment. However, you need to ensure that you do not participate in wrongdoing, as you will not be absorbed for being a feature writer or journalist. It is also necessary to enlighten the victim of the evil practice of the purpose of the writing which is to warn the public, save lives and money, etc. You also need the cooperation, consent and support of your editor when embarking on fact-finding mission.

Travelogue

This is an account of a trip to a place or places of interest. It informs the readers about life in other places and draws lessons by comparing life in those places with the situation at home. Travelogue usually includes brief profiles of the places visited, blended with the experience of the writer from the places visited. It gives useful information about other places in order to expand people's worldview. Newsmen who visit distant places during official duties or on holidays do file in travelogues. Such articles are of particular interest to specialized magazines of automobiles firms, airlines and tourist organisations whose aim may be to induce people to travel.

When writing travelogue, choose a theme to guide your writing, this is necessary to ensure that your thoughts do not stray. You should also examine and explain the significant of the place you visited to your readers and use better situation abroad to draw lessons in a subtle way without sermonizing. Efforts should be made to avoid unnecessary details; include facts only so as not to bore your readers. Inclusion of good illustration from the place visited will be of interest to your readers.

FEATURE WRITING PROCESS

Think of the feature as the journalistic equivalent of an essay, it will then be easy to write a feature following the traditional style of essay writing. Eko (1999) lists the following as steps involved in writing:

Finding the Subject: The first step in feature writing is to decide on a topic or have it decided for you. Choosing a topic is a creative process. It calls for practical, common sense techniques and guidelines. However, in a situation where your editor assigns a topic to you, you have no choice but to work on the topic.

Establishing the theme (purpose): The theme is similar to the thesis of a scholarly paper and provides unity and coherence to the piece. It should not be too broad or too narrow. Several factors come into play when choosing a theme: Has the story been done before? Is the story of interest

to the audience? Does the story have holding power (emotional appeal)? What makes the story worthy of being reported? The theme answers the question, "So what?"

Thinking Through Your Topic. It is essential to think through chosen topic in order to start well. The nature of your topic will determine the types of writing you are doing. So you need to determine whether it is going to be descriptive, narrative, argumentative/persuasive or expository.

GATHERING INFORMATION

Library Sources: The library contains large volumes of information useful for writing a good feature story. Reference materials like encyclopedias, yearbook, atlas, almanac, who is who, etc will be of tremendous help to a feature writer. Articles that have been published in the past, which are related to the current topic can also be harnessed.

Personal Observation: This is the most reliable form of information gathering. The feature writer, by personally observing a situation will give attraction to important details which an ordinary person may overlook. Besides, it also makes the story and the paper credible because the writer was there to see things himself. Also, the feature writer will be able to demonstrate his creative and literary capability in describing things that he has seen himself. However, the writer must ensure emotional detachment so that he would be able to write unbiased, balanced and undistorted story.

Interviewing: Interviewing here involves eliciting information from human sources for the purpose of writing feature stories. Interview can be carried out through various ways:

Face-to-face interview. Here, the interviewer must prepare adequately and ensure the success of the interview. This will include getting background information about the interviewee and preparing a list of questions

that will be asked. The interviewer must display self-confidence and sound articulation. He must master the facts of questioning and how to probe into interviewee's mind. His physical appearance must be smart and he must be punctual at the interview venue. He also needs to learn how to ask question intelligently, objectively and politely. You may need a tape recorder and a notebook to complement each other to capture the details of the interview.

Mail Interview. You can get information by mailing the questions to the respondent and receiving the answers also by mail. However, you need to enclose a self-addressed envelope by which the respondent will make his reply. Though this method is cost effective and allows respondents convenience, the poor mail delivery system makes it unreliable and ineffective. Besides, experience has shown that people in this part of world generally have poor attitude in responding to this method.

Electronic Mail: The emergence of e-mail through the internet has also made interview easier. This is actually not different from normal mailing system in operation except that it is done electronically. However, it is bedeviled by people's lack of computer knowledge and operation of internet, as well as low access to internet.

Telephone Interview: This happens to be the easiest and fastest means of obtaining information for feature stories; it saves feature writer the traveling pains, since contact can be made through phone. It can also be used to establish preliminary contact in preparation for face-to-face meeting or interview. The interviewer need to introduce himself properly and announce the purpose of his call. Ask question directly and allow the interviewee to reply and do most of the talking. A tape recorder and note may be needed to get the details of the interview.

OUTLINING

An outline is a skeleton of your feature. It helps you to organize your thoughts and ideas and assist you to maintain focus throughout the feature. The feature type determines the pattern of outline you make.

Whatever type, you need to decide on the order of presentation of the points that will be discussed from the information you have gathered i.e. the notes you have taken and the ones recorded on tape. Those points should be arranged, as they will appear in the story.

WRITING THE FEATURE

After the outline has been properly made and modified as may be needed, you go ahead to write your feature following the pattern of your outline. Like any other writing, you definitely going to have the beginning, which is your introduction, the body and the conclusion.

The Introduction

This is the opening part of your article called **lead** as in the case of straight news. Unlike the straight news which adopts the inverted pyramid style and highlights on the 5Ws and H, a feature lead only establishes the purpose of the writing. On the other hand, it may serve as a bridge by giving the background of the topic under discussion and link it with the present situation.

Types of Feature Intro or Lead

The News peg lead: Used for writing fast-breaking or running events. It reminds the readers of the recent news events and goes on to supply the background and analysis. It is crisp and straight-forward by telling exactly what the topic is all about. (Akinfeleye, 1987).

Example: *Barring any last minute change of mind, the nation may, for the second time, be thrown to another round of labour crisis, no thanks to the unresolved issue of the recent hike in prices of petroleum products.*

*Fuel Price, Crisis – Where lies the answer? *Punch* Oct. 24, 2004.

Question Lead: This intro begins with a question for the purpose of arousing the interest of the readers. Example:

Why has what is meant to be a blessing turned to a curse? It is very sad that what has been a source of blessing, prosperity and development in other places is the cause of our own impoverish-

ment, conflicts and chaos.

***Petroleum- a resource curse for Nigeria.**

Quotation Lead: This begins with a direct quotation. The quotation must be significant and gives insight into the theme of the feature. Example:

Think not of what your country will do for you but what you will do for your country” That was the attitude of Mr Charless Uba, 20 years ago when he founded the creative club for progress. Today he has proved that contribution to human and national development is the whole essence of living.

***Living to serve others.**

Anecdotal Lead: This begins with a short story. Example:

They trooped out that Tuesday morning of Sept 21 with jerrycans, hoses, buckets and funnels, looking very desperate. They looked even more desperate than Nigerian politicians on election day. It was a kind of desperation that would dry up in a jiffy, so they needed to get there at the speed of light.

The scene was the serene village of Okurikang in the Odukpani LGA Cross River state. Time was about 9am. The native had just been informed of the discovery of a goldmine in the neighbourhood. Then, in a matter of minutes, virtually all the villagers had gathered with their tools, ready to fetch fuel, free fuel from a petrol tanker that had been involved in an accident a while earlier.

***Dehumanized by Abject Poverty.** *The story of villagers who were more interested in how much fuel they could scoop form a faller petrol tanker than rushing to the rescue of the trapped driver. Saturday. Punch Oct.9, 2004.*

Literary Allusion Lead: This involves reference to literary work and holy books to captivate the attention of the readers. However it must be ensured that such allusions are not used out of context. Example 1:

It is necessary that Nigerians abandon the Hypocratic behaviour

of the Levities and adopt the compassionate gesture of the good Samaritan in our relationship if this country will move forward.

Example 2.

The conflicts between landlords and their tenants in recent times have been on the increase. Many landlords have been described as shylocks and the tenants are appealing to the government to do something to rescue them from their hands.

Descriptive Lead: Gives a detailed description of the scene or setting of the event that happened. Example:

The tension was palpable; sounds of gunshots followed each other in quick succession, men and women ran helter skelter for their dear lives. It was a terrible day of terror as gun-tilting bandits raided Ota market and removed goods worth millions of naira.

***The Havoc of Armed Robbery.**

Effect Lead: This is used to create effect. Example 1:

No fewer than 500 people were burnt to ashes as two luxury buses collided and immediately caught fire along Lagos-Ibadan Expressway.

Example 2:

With three air crashes within 42 days claiming the lives of 226 Nigerians and nationals of other countries, tears have literally washed off the wool that hitherto appear to have covered the eyes of many to the beckoning inadequacies of the aviation sector. Truth is, Nigerians can now see the stark reality, albeit in pains as the outgoing year made them to.

***A nation's year of pain, anguish in aviation. The Guardian, Wed, Dec.28, 2005.**

The lead types identified above are by no means exhaustive. There can be as many other types as possible depending on the style and creativity of the feature writer. It should also be noted that it is necessary for the writer to logically link his lead to the body of the story. Having another paragraph usually called the bridge, which enables the readers to make transition from the INTRO to the body and thus have full understanding

of the whole story, does this (Awoyinka and Dimgbal 1991).

The Body

Writing the body of feature is not different from what is done in any good writing. The pattern is already set i.e. the outline still serves as a guide that gives direction to your writing. The ability to write a good story depends on your language ability, skill in the use of word, creativity and other literary abilities. You must ensure coherence and completeness of your thoughts. They must be presented logically to sustain the attention of the readers. You must also ensure that your language is appropriate to your audience so that you will not excommunicate them.

CONCLUSION

It is necessary that you bring your story to a good conclusion. Your closing words should make an impact on your readers and tie the various strands of your story together. You can do this by summarizing the main parts that you have discussed in your feature or repeat some of the key ideas that it contains. Another way is to challenge people to do certain things or call for action on an issue. You can as well trigger them to think on the consequences of an issue.

WRITING THE SECOND DRAFT

It will be necessary for you to take some time off and then go over what you have written again. Definitely, you are going to have some things to correct, rewrite, read, adjust and change. Writing generally involves lots of writing, and rewriting, canceling, changing words etc. At the end, you must ensure that your feature is presentable, well written and satisfactory.

GENERAL TIPS FOR FEATURE WRITING

1. Focus on human interest - the feeling and emotion you put into the article are critical. Don't think about writing a "science" story - think about writing a "human interest" story.
2. Be clear about why you are writing the article. Is it to inform, persuade, observe, evaluate, or evoke emotion?

3. Accuracy is important - you can interpret and embroider but not fudge.
4. Keep your audience clearly in mind - what are their desires, what really matters to them?
5. Interviews for features usually need to be in-depth and in person rather than over the phone - this enables you to add in colour and detail.
6. Use anecdotes and direct quotes to tell the story - try not to use too many of your own words.
7. Talk to more than one person to provide a more complete picture - but don't just add in sources to show how much work you've done. Be ruthless about who you put in and who you leave out!
8. Don't rely on the computer spell-checker - especially those with a U.S. dictionary.
9. Decide on the 'tense' of your story at the start and stick to it. Present tense usually works best.
10. Avoid lengthy, complex paragraphs. Your article will appear in columns, so one or two sentences equals a paragraph.
11. Ideas come from everywhere - watch, read, listen, keep up to date, take notes. Talk to people outside the field of science to find out what interests and concerns them.
12. Write clear, concise sentences. Sprinkle direct quotations, observations and additional background throughout the story. Paragraphs can be written chronologically or in order of importance.
13. Use a thread. Connect the beginning, body and conclusion of the story. Because a feature generally runs longer than a news story, it is effective to weave a thread throughout the story, which connects the lead to the body and to the conclusion. This thread can be a single person, an event or a thing, and it usually highlights the theme.
14. Use transition: Connect paragraphs with transitional words, phrases, and direct quotations. Transition is particularly important in a long feature examining several people or

events because it is the tool writers use to move subtly from one person or topic to the next. Transition keeps readers from being jarred by the writing.

15. Use dialogue when possible. Feature writers, like fiction writers, often use dialogue to keep a story moving. Of course, feature writers cannot make up dialogue; they listen for it during the reporting process. Good dialogue is like good observation in a story; it gives readers strong mental images and keeps them attached to the writing and to the story's key players (Wray 1996; Soules M. 2004).

FLAWS TO AVOID

Wordiness: This is verbal obesity. It is the use of unnecessary words and chopping up of a simple idea into complex statements. It can be categorized into two- Deadwood and Gobbledygook. **Deadwood** is a word which does nothing but take up space and clutter the writing e.g. Responsible students (*of today*)* do not allow bad friends influence them negatively (to misbehave)*, neither do they follow bad examples (*of their friends*)*.

A good student should (be a person who) know the basic techniques (*and intricacies that are*)* involved in reading and passing exams.

Gobbledygook: Consists of long, abstract or technical words that help create unnecessary long and complex sentences. Many use it due to misconception that it dignifies their thought e.g.

We have come to the understanding and cognizant that the lecture will be brought to termination in no distant future *.

Instead of: *We have learnt that the lecture will come to an end soon.*

Euphemism: Involves using humble, pleasant words to replace unpleasant situation: e.g. *Pass away* for *died*. Euphemism don't just blur reality, they blot out images of horror. They obscure an issue. However, it may be needed at times especially when handling a sensitive story.

Clichés: are expressions that have become flat and stale from overuse. They result into dullness, e.g. Acid test, easier said than done, nipped in

the bud, cutting edge, etc.

Passive Construction. Active voice communicates a sense of action and makes sentences effective; passive lacks the power of the active choice.

Sexist Language: Use chairperson for chairman, police officer for policeman, weather reporter for weatherman etc.

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