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829 S. SULLIVAN STREET
SEATTLE, WA 98108

www.clpmag.org
206.913.2916

Writing a Feature Article 101: A Quick and Dirty Guide to Writing the Story

When I left college with a degree in journalism last winter I found myself saturated in theory, but lacking in practical and applicable knowledge in the field I was entering. I am still, and will always be, learning about how to become a better journalist. I am no expert, but one of the great things about journalism is that there are no experts; the best journalists are curious, engaged people always ready to learn something new. In this guide I'll try to impart some of the lessons I've learned (functional and philosophical) in reporting internationally over the past year in hopes that I can help demystify how a story actually gets found, reported, written and produced.

Basic reporting Strategies and Hints

- **How to find a story:** Paying attention to the news is the best tip I can offer. Most of our stories have come from leads we've found in the news sources we follow. Another good avenue is NGOs (non-governmental organizations or nonprofits) in the region/country you're covering. They usually have their ear to the ground and know what the most current issues are. Also, be sure and always keep your ears open, even in social situations. Many of the stories I've written emerged from casual conversations with people at parties, bus-stops, and other social situations.
- **Finding Contacts and Shaping your Story:** Again, NGOs are the best place to start. I usually do a general search for NGOs working on the issue I hope to cover and start making phone calls from there. Nonprofits are very open to media attention and eager to give you background information and additional contacts.

Usually, I have a broad issue I'm interested in and then ask NGOs involved what they feel are the least covered, or most important aspects of that issue. I always do general news searches to find out what has already been covered and how, and try to shape my story to address what has been overlooked or ignored.

- **Basic Tools:** You'll need a notebook and pen, an audio recorder of some kind, and a photographer. I've found that reporting with another person who can act as a note taker and extra set of ears is very useful. Most importantly you need to bring curiosity, engagement, and flexibility to your interviews—if you're interested and passionate about your subject, the people you're interviewing will be too.

It's also important to let the story change when appropriate. Almost no story I've embarked on turned out as I'd originally expected. Don't force your agenda if it isn't working--be ready to let the story tell itself.

- **Look for a Main Character:** Once you've obtained background information and know your basic thesis, look for a main character whose experience can humanize the issue. Start asking your contacts (once again NGOs are very helpful here) if they know of people who can offer firsthand accounts.

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In my experience, personal testimony is what drives your narrative, attracts your audience, and makes the story intimate and engaging. Also, look for an event (a protest or court verdict, for example) that helps make your article timely and relevant and can work as a scene setter.

- **Find Experts and Opposing Voices:** Look for people (through internet searches and independent research or your NGO contacts) that can speak as “objective experts” or even as opposing voices.

I believe that “experts” should never be weighted more heavily in your story than firsthand accounts and experiences, but I also believe that the depth and texture of a story is improved when people recognized as “knowledgeable in the field” offer some perspective. An opposing voice (if appropriate) is important as it challenges your readers and encourages dialogue.

- **A Few tips for Interviews:** Don’t be afraid to relentlessly revisit a question or topic that you feel hasn’t been properly addressed by the interviewee. Sometimes people need time to warm up to you or to a topic, or will respond better if your question is worded differently. Keep trying.

Continue taking notes even after the interview is officially over. Sometimes people say the most revealing or intimate things when they feel that they’re out of the “hot seat.”

A great question to ask if you feel like you don’t fully understand the perspective of your interviewee is “what is your ideal solution/resolution?” Obviously this only works in certain circumstances, but when appropriate it can help clarify a person’s point of view or opinion.

Another great question is “Why do you care about this issue?” This can be an effective way to get a strong and emotional quote about why the topic you’re covering is so important.

You can also ask for the turning point in a story, the moment when everything changed or catalyzed. This can help you shape the narrative of your story as well.

- **Be Fearless and Confident:** Being a journalist is hard and people aren’t always happy to see you coming. A journalism professor once told me never to apologize for or feel embarrassed about my job. It’s important that you believe that it is your right and duty to ask questions and obtain information.

Be confident and people will respond in kind. Remember that even if you’re new to this you’re a journalist all the same. Call yourself a journalist and act professionally. Don’t apologize for a lack of experience and never say, “I’ve never done this before.” You’ll be amazed how many opportunities open to you once you start calling yourself a reporter.

Basic Anatomy/Structure of a feature Article

- **The Lede:** The lede is the first paragraph (or graph) of an article. This is your opportunity to grab your audience—so use it. A scene setter, or a vivid description of a scene that describes your

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topic, is a great way to transport your readers and get their attention. As you're reporting describe what you see (weather, noises, street scenes, etc.) and use it as your opener – remember to take notes while you are actually there, reporting. Another great option is using the dramatic moment in your story (the climax of a protest, a re-enactment of a crime, or a description of an event) to draw readers in.

- **Color/Description:** Follow your sources everywhere—and don't be afraid to invite yourself. Go to their houses, their offices, and eat dinner with them at their favorite diner. Everything that gives you a window into their lives gives you color, description, and above all wonderful scene setters for your article.
- **The Tic-Toc:** This is usually employed in the graph or two following the lede and takes the audience back in time (or perspective), showing them the bigger issue you intend to discuss.
- **Quotes:** A first quote should come in the second or third graph of your story. I usually introduce my main character in a first quote, this way they can become an immediate part of my story's narrative. Other quotes from other sources can come later to illustrate important points or add emotion. Remember, a diversity of voices is important, but too many quotes can become confusing and convolute your piece.
- **Narrative Arc:** Articles, though they are structured, are still pieces of writing. Your article should be colorful, creative, and interesting. Think back to your basic creative writing class, and strive for conflict/tension, a character, scene setting, description, suspense, action, and resolution of some kind.
- **Show, don't Tell:** This is the most important lesson in good journalism, or writing in general for that matter. You shouldn't be an omniscient voice from above, informing your readers about topics and dates and figures—show them the details they need to draw their own conclusions.

Give your audience scenes and characters and great emotional quotes and they won't need you to tell them how they should think or feel about the matter. The first person is almost always inappropriate in a journalistic feature piece, as it breaks the mood, threatens objectivity, and usually sounds preachy instead of informative.

- **The Kicker:** The kicker is the last graph in your article. While it is pretty formulaic it should also make an impact. The kicker of an article is almost always a quote that emotionally encapsulates the story. I usually use a quote from my main character that I hope will resonate with the readers and help the article end on a poignant note.

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