**FEATURE WRITING**

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. Features often:

* Profile people who make the news
* Explain events that move or shape the news
* Analyze what is happening in the world, nation or community
* Teach an audience how to do something
* Suggest better ways to live
* Examine trends
* Entertain.

**HARD NEWS AND SOFT NEWS**

A news story can be hard, chronicling as concisely as possible the who, what, where, when, why and how of an event. Or it can be soft, standing back to examine the people, places and things that shape the world, nation or community. Hard news events--such as the death of a famous public figure or the plans of city council to raise taxes--affect many people, and the primary job of the media is to report them as they happen. Soft news, such as the widespread popularity of tattooing among athletes or the resurgence of interest in perennial gardening, is also reported by the media. Feature stories are often written on these soft news events.

There is no firm line between a news story and a feature, particularly in contemporary media when many news stories are "featurized." For instance, the results of an Olympic competition may be hard news: "Canadian diver Anne Montmigny claimed her second medal in synchronized diving today." A featurized story might begin: "As a girl jumping off a log into the stream running behind her house, Anne Montmigny never dreamed she would leap into the spotlight of Olympic diving competition." One approach emphasizes the facts of the event, while the feature displaces the facts to accommodate the human interest of the story. Most news broadcasts or publications combine the two to reach a wider audience.

Today’s media use many factors to determine what events they will report, including

* timeliness
* proximity
* consequence
* the perceived interest of the audience
* competition
* editorial goals
* and the influence of advertisers.

All these factors put pressure on the media to give their audiences both news and features. In a version of featurizing, pressure from advertisers or lobbyists often result in writing that appears at first blush to be news when it is, in fact, promotion for a product, idea, or policy.

When a hard news story breaks--for example, the sinking of a ferry in the Greek islands--it should be reported with a hard news lead. Soft leads and stories are more appropriate when a major news event is not being reported for the first time: a profile of the Canadian couple who had their vacation cut short when the Greek ferry struck a reef and sunk while the crew was watching television. Some editors dispute the emphasis on soft writing and refer to it as jell-o journalism.

Feature writing can stand alone, or it can be a **sidebar** to the main story, the **mainbar**. A sidebar runs next to the main story or elsewhere in the same edition, providing an audience with additional information on the same topic.

**TYPES OF FEATURES**

**Personality profiles**: A personality profile is written to bring an audience closer to a person in or out of the news. Interviews and observations, as well as creative writing, are used to paint a vivid picture of the person. The CBC’s recent profile of Pierre Elliot Trudeau is a classic example of the genre and makes use of archival film footage, interviews, testimonials, and fair degree of editorializing by the voice-over commentary.

**Human interest stories**: A human interest story is written to show a subject’s oddity or its practical, emotional, or entertainment value.

**Trend stories**: A trend story examines people, things or organizations that are having an impact on society. Trend stories are popular because people are excited to read or hear about the latest fads.

**In-depth stories**: Through extensive research and interviews, in-depth stories provide a detailed account well beyond a basic news story or feature.

**Backgrounders**: A backgrounder--also called an analysis piec--adds meaning to current issues in the news by explaining them further. These articles bring an audience up-to-date, explaining how this country, this organization, this person happens to be where it is now.

**WRITING AND ORGANIZING FEATURE STORIES**

Feature writers seldom use the inverted-pyramid form. Instead, they may write a chronology that builds to a climax at the end, a narrative, a first-person article about one of their own experiences or a combination of these. Their stories are held together by a thread, and they often end where the lead started, with a single person or event. Here are the steps typically followed in organizing a feature story:

**Choose the theme.** 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?"

**Write a lead that invites an audience into the story.** A summary may not be the best lead for a feature. A lead block of one or two paragraphs often begins a feature. Rather than put the news elements of the story in the lead, the feature writer uses the first two or three paragraphs to set a mood, to arouse readers, to invite them inside. Then the **news peg** or the significance of the story is provided in the third or fourth paragraph, the **nut graph**. Because it explains the reason the story is being written, the nut graph--also called the "so what" graph--is a vital paragraph in every feature. The nut graph should be high in the story. Do not make readers wait until the 10th or 11th paragraph before telling them what the story is about.

The body provides vital information while it educates, entertains, and emotionally ties an audience to the subject. The ending will wrap up the story and come back to the lead, often with a quotation or a surprising climax. Important components of the body of a feature story are background information, the thread of the story, transition, dialogue, and voice.

**Provide vital background information.** If appropriate, a paragraph or two of background should be placed high in the story to bring the audience up to date.

**Write clear, concise sentences.** Sprinkle direct quotations, observations and additional background throughout the story. Paragraphs can be written chronologically or in order of importance.

**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.

**Use transition.**Connect paragraphs with transitional words, paraphrases, 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.

**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.

**Establish a voice.** Another key element that holds a feature together is voice, the "signature" or personal style of each writer. Voice is the personality of the writer and can be used to inject colour, tone, and subtle emotional commentary into the story. Voice should be used subtly (unless you’re able to make a fetish of it like Hunter S. Thompson!). The blatant intrusion of a distinctive voice into news writing has been called **gonzo journalism**--an irresponsible, if entertaining, trend in contemporary writing according to traditionalists.

**Conclude with a quotation or another part of the thread.** A feature can trail off like a news story or it can be concluded with a climax. Often, a feature ends where the lead started, with a single person or event.