

## CHAPTER ONE

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# Welcome to the Features Department

**T**he world of feature writing is a fertile one. Today daily newspapers, alternative papers and magazines of all genres need good feature writers. And there is a tremendous crossover of talent among the various types of publications. I started my own career at a give-away weekly, went to a paid circulation weekly, then to a daily newspaper feature section, then became editor of a Sunday magazine and now am editor of *Minnesota Monthly*, a regional magazine outside the world of newspapers. I got the job at the Sunday magazine after the editor there left for *National Geographic*, and one of the former editors at *Minnesota Monthly* is now an editor in a newspaper feature section. The freelance writers who write for *Minnesota Monthly* often have their articles published in daily newspapers, alternative weeklies and other monthly magazines. Skills they learn writing for one medium can easily be transferred to another. Indeed, many of the best magazine writers began in newspapers and some have even made the leap to books. I started at the bottom and worked my way up. So can you. Or you may be one of the fast-track wunderkinds, but either way, the trip getting into feature writing is hard work but great fun.

### What Is Feature Writing?

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*Leonard Witt*

Richard Cheverton, an editor at *The Orange County Register* in Santa Ana, California, is one of the nation's most respected authorities on

feature writing, but not long ago he wrote, "Who the hell really understands what a feature is? I've worked for over a decade as a feature editor, and I'm not sure I could define the word 'feature' for a freshman journalism class. You can nail down a news, or sports, or business story—but grabbing the essence of a feature is like wrestling a squid; it'll soon depart in a cloud of ink. Good editors just know. Don't ask me how. They just do."

So, too, do good feature writers. They see and feel a feature when other writers around them might be focusing on the breaking story, on what used to be called the "hard news."

When I edited a feature section, we ran stories like "Roller Coasting: The Absolute Delight of Coming Back Alive"; "Charles Atlas: Puny Weaklings Still Clamor to be Muscle Men"; "Brooklynese? Hey! Dey Don't Tawk Funny"; "Airwave Psychology: Concern Growing Over Radio, TV Advice Shows." In addition to these were advice columns, theater reviews and shorts about television.

In the Sunday magazine we did stories about the risks doctors have of contracting AIDS, about a married woman who gave up her baby for adoption, and about the quirky requests celebrities make when they come to Minneapolis and St. Paul hotels.

At *Minnesota Monthly* I asked a freelancer to write a story entitled "Early Motherhood, Later Motherhood," about two friends in their forties, one with a 5-year-old daughter and the other with a 25-year-old daughter. Other stories at the *Monthly* include a profile of a museum director who is waking up a staid old institution, and another is an essay from an ex-farmgirl who laments the passing of a way of life.

The magazine does home design features, food features, book reviews and arts stories as well as entertainment listings.

The stories I've edited by freelancers and staff writers vary in length from a couple hundred words to several thousand words. The writers' styles are just as varied. The person who did the doctor and AIDS story would not be the best person to do the quirky celebrity hotel story. Her style is too serious; her strength is tenacity, research, building giant files, and then taking the time to write and rewrite to make it all read like a nonfiction novel.

The guy who wrote the celebrity story has a loose, funny style. He likes to get into a story immediately and then get it written quickly. If he used the techniques that were used in the AIDS story, his story would have lost its punch.

Just in those three publications alone—the newspaper feature section, the Sunday magazine and the regional monthly—there was writing work for just about anyone who could write well. All kinds of styles appeared. The home design story is going to be far different from the story about doctors and AIDS, which is, of course, going to be different from the one about quirky hotels.

And the stories in those three publications are going to be far different from the stories that appear in *Gourmet*, *Cosmopolitan* and the *New York Times*.

Each writer must decide on his or her interests and style and then begin to actively pursue editors who can provide the work. In the world of feature writing the topics are infinite and the outlets many. The key to success is hard work, fine writing, and the ability to learn and to grow in the craft.

For the most part, the people who succeed are the ones who do their research, do solid reporting, and care about their writing.

Is there one kind of feature writing that's better than another? The answer is no. However, after saying that, I should point out my personal prejudice. I love stories that read like nonfiction novels. Stories in which characters come alive. It is the most sophisticated form of nonfiction writing, but not necessarily the best nonfiction writing.

To understand the nonfiction novel approach, think of drawing a continuum from a quick-breaking newspaper story to a full-blown nonfiction novel such as Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. On this continuum, feature writing would begin somewhere in the middle and begin moving toward the nonfiction novel. And in fact, today, the best writing in newspaper feature sections and magazines such as *Vanity Fair* and *Esquire* is probably more closely akin to the nonfiction book than to the traditional breaking newspaper story.

So let's back up on that continuum and start with the breaking news story. Take, for example, a train-car collision in which a group of teenage girls is killed. (This, incidentally, is similar to a story done by a feature writer I used to work with.) The next-day story probably would start something like, "Four girls returning from buying their prom dresses were killed yesterday when their car was hit by a freight train." The story would give all the facts. It would tell where the crash occurred, the time, who was in the car, the name of the train engineer; it would have quotes from the family, from eyewitnesses, from officials.

Now on that continuum from news story to nonfiction book we

might have a writer—a good writer, a sensitive writer—do a Sunday piece on how the town is stunned or the story might in part re-create how the accident occurred.

Moving closer to the nonfiction book might be a rendition similar to Thornton Wilder's novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*.

The writer would re-create the entire day through meticulous research, by intense interviewing, and by chronicling all the important details. He might start with the engineer waking. Kissing his wife. He might describe the house, bring in telling details about the engineer. Perhaps the engineer has a daughter of his own.

The writer would have him starting out on his train; the size and speed of the train and its limitations would come alive. The train would be moving toward the fateful moment at the crossing. The writer would come back to the girls. The writer would probably take us into one of their houses. Have the girls wake, make conversation, reveal details of their lives. The writer would bring the girls in the car and the engineer on a literal head-on collision.

The reader could not let go of this story and would remember it for months. The writer would take us to the crash itself with the train rounding the slightly blind corner. We would see the branches that partially obscured the road, we'd hear the music playing loudly in the car.

To do all of this and do it factually usually requires experience. To pull this off the feature writer will have to know all the techniques of reporting. He will have a ton of notes, official reports and observations to sift through and then will have to turn in a beautifully written story with a beginning, a middle and an end. The writer will have central characters that we get to know and care about. This is feature writing in its most advanced form.

### Room for Many Writing Styles

However, literary journalism is only one type of feature writing. Turn back to the lifestyle or feature sections, thumb through several magazines, and you will see many other forms. You will find writers who specialize in fashion, food reviewing, quick interviews or in-depth profiles. And the best of these writers are no lesser talents than the feature writer who moves closer to the nonfiction book. Indeed, writers like food critic Mimi Sheraton, movie reviewers Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert, and health writer Jane Brody, are among the superstars of newspaper writing. You'll find their work in the feature pages.

They know about writing, they know about reporting, and they know about their subjects. At the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* Sunday magazine, Maralyn Lois Polak conducts an interview each week with a famous person. On the continuum from breaking story to nonfiction novel her work in the *Inquirer* would be in the middle, but as a writing talent she is near the top because what she does she does better than just about anyone else. And since this is a book about feature writing, that is important to remember. In the world of features there is room for many kinds of writers with many kinds of styles and with many aspirations. Some will want to be full-time staff writers at a newspaper or magazine, others would like to make their living by freelancing, and others might want to do the occasional article while holding a nonwriting job. As an editor I have published them all and will continue to do so to ensure my magazine is fresh and lively.

**T**op-notch feature stories demand top-notch writing, and the best writing comes from getting away from your desk. It means getting out where the stories are. Indeed, reporting is half the fun—and many times the only fun—because all too often the writing itself means pain. As an editor, I have worked with some truly fine writers, and I have watched them struggle over pieces and watched the color drain out of their faces, or sometimes watched their faces turn red with anger, as I had to tell them their stories weren't quite right. The story needs another rewrite. And then I watched as they struggled to get it perfect and then finally watched in amazement as raw copy was turned into a masterpiece. No one understands this process better than feature writer Christopher Scanlan who is about to take you into the life of a feature writer and show you the glories, joys, tears and struggles that make feature writing one of the world's best professions.

## A Day in the Life of a Feature Writer

*Christopher Scanlan*

6:30 A.M.

In the Waters of Boca Ciega Bay,  
Off Indian Rocks Beach, Florida

Ah, the feature writer's life. Spinning gossamer webs of prose. Rivaling the foreign correspondent for glamour. No daily deadlines, no stultifying late nights with the Zoning Board.

Oh yeah? So what am I doing huddled on the bone-hard seat of a 16-foot boat bouncing along the trampoline that is Boca Ciega Bay at dawn on a stormy April morning?

Reporting, that's what. "You can't write writing," Melvin Mencher used to drum into our heads at Columbia Journalism School. At the time, it sounded like nonsense, but after 15 years writing newspaper and magazine features for a living, I realized it makes perfect sense. The essence of good feature writing is excellent reporting.

And so that's why I'm in crab fisherman Alan Frederiksen's crab boat, getting raw material for "A Day in the Life of Florida Business," a freelance assignment for *Florida Trend* magazine. I'm enveloped in one of Frederiksen's rain parkas. My tape recorder is wrapped in a plastic sandwich bag, my notebook is splattered with salt spray. But there's no other way to see the iridescent shimmer of a blue crab's claws as it clings to the barnacle-encrusted wires of the fisherman's trap. And a telephone interview wouldn't enable me to write a passage like this one:

As morning commuter traffic rumbles over the Madeira Beach Causeway above, Frederiksen hits pay dirt: a fat stone crab. Deftly breaking off the crab's claws before tossing it overboard, Frederiksen says that the two claws alone will sell at his fish store for almost \$8.

Turning north in the shadow of waterfront condos, Frederiksen turns pessimistic on the future of commercial fishing in the state. "Crabbing is the one industry that will survive because the crab is a scavenger and he can live in different waters. But others—mullet, pompano, redfish, trout—they need a clean habitat, and people pollute."

Of course, writing features demands time at the desk, planning, drafting, revising and editing. But the most important part of the process is reporting. Without it you have no story. With it comes the inspiration, the excitement. Reporting is the sculptor's clay, the artist's palette, the doctor's vital signs. For the feature writer, the tools are significant details, the revelations of things said and left unsaid, the shape of narrative that forms the skeleton on which to hand the stuff of life. And the only way to obtain these elements is by putting in the time.

Much of my working time is spent hanging around, talking with people, listening, watching. A feature writer's workday is rarely

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nine to five. To report life in a crime-infested housing project, I spent the night in a tenant's apartment. To tell the story of a pediatric intensive care unit, I spent five full days there, and several evenings, including the late night when the life-support equipment was disconnected on a four-year-old boy pulled lifeless from a relative's swimming pool. To convey the life of a blind child, I went to school with him, to swim class, to summer camp, ate dinner with his family, watching and listening. While most of my stories have required sizable investments of time, I still work for a daily newspaper and often a story will not wait. "From Jon to Lani, the gift of life" told the story of two teenagers, a troubled girl and a clean-cut Boy Scout, who met on a train trestle after an Amtrak train severed the girl's leg. I got the assignment before lunch. It was finished before dinner. But no matter what the deadline, the essential qualities of reporting and writing remain the same: perseverance, curiosity, caring and above all, determination to find the truth and convey it in the most effective way in the time available. A feature written in a day is more of a snapshot of a story; the in-depth feature is the full-length portrait.

When I look back at the stories I've written over the years, what remains with me are the moments that captured time spent in the field, scenes from a day in the life of a feature writer, one that spans nearly two decades, half a dozen jobs, and hundreds of stories. Like all journalism, feature writing is the art of listening to what people say and what they do long enough to understand what they are all about.

7:30 A.M.

Barrington, Rhode Island

The Barton boys — Jed, 7, Bradford, 5, and Curtis, 3, are seated at the kitchen table, juice, bananas and toasted muffins before them. Jed is rubbing his right eye with his knuckles.

"Jed," his mother says sharply, "put your hand down and start eating."

The hand drops.

Jed never has to be told to stop sucking his thumb; eye-rubbing is the blind child's bad habit.

His breakfast waits, but he has to feel for it. He lifts his right hand off his lap. Fingers straight out, palm down. He starts at the edge of the table and makes a pass over the Formica. Slow and deliberate

until it is over the muffin. The hand hovers, like a spaceship, and then descends. The fingers make a circle, pick up the bread, bring it to his mouth. He puts it down and the hand reaches out again, looking for the cup. It stops when he feels the plastic.

"Is this mine?"

"Yes," his mother says, "that's yours."

The feature writer's mission is to convey the reality of life beyond the writer's experience. What's it like to be blinded at birth? What's it like when your child is born blind? Or, in another story, what's it like to smoke all your life and then be stricken with cancer? What's it like for those left behind? Those questions, natural ones for a former smoker like myself, became a story entitled "The Death of a Smoker" that told the tale of Peter DeMilio who had a bad cough at Christmas and was dead by the following Mother's Day, killed by the lung cancer caused by 50 years of smoking.

2 P.M.

Fort Myers, Florida

"I never saw a man go downhill so fast in my life," his daughter says. The transplanted northerner who used to laugh at Floridians wrapped in jackets in cool weather now couldn't go outside on sunny days without a heavy coat. Since New Year's DeMilio had lost nearly 50 pounds. His hair fell out, his muscles withered away. He developed the wasted condition known as cachexia, common to cancer patients, and his doctor noted, concentration camp victims.

... After her husband died, friends advised Mrs. DeMilio to get rid of Pete's things: it would make the adjustment easier. ... She used to open their bedroom closet and stare at his clothes, take them out, match up outfits for him to wear. After three months she finally gave them away. She kept his trench coat, his slippers. Sometimes she wears his blue and white warm-up jacket.

... Marie DeMilio is 58, a small, youthful woman with short-cropped reddish-blond hair. Grief has left its mark. Lined and tense when she talks about her husband's losing battles with tobacco and cancer, Mrs. DeMilio's face is transformed when she talks about Peter: His two left feet that couldn't accommodate a Lindy yet managed a beautiful fox-trot, his happiness on the water, how he loved to impress his family up North with his cowboy boots and hat.

Smiling at memories and snapshots in her albums, Marie DeMilio relaxes. Once again, it seems, she is a young woman very much in love with the boy who took her to the movies and held her hand as



they walked down the street. Mornings and nights are the hardest for her now.

"It feels like one big nightmare," she says. "Maybe I will wake up, and he will be in bed with me. But I know it's not going to be so.

"Would you believe it? I take his after-shave lotion and spray it on his pillow just so I can smell him. Just the smell of it makes me feel like he's with me."

I write because words unlock doors and open windows. I write features because I get to write about people's lives and can strive to convey emotional truths which to me seem universal and eternal.

Will Durant, the philosopher, once observed:

"Civilization is a stream with banks. The stream is sometimes filled with blood from people killing, stealing, shouting, and doing the things historians usually record; while on the banks, unnoticed, people build homes, make love, raise children, sing songs, write poetry, and even whittle statues. The story of civilization is the story of what happened on the banks. Historians are pessimists because they ignore the banks for the river."

So are most journalists. I write to make people feel, to make myself feel, and most of all, to ride the river, watching life on the banks.

For me, reporting is an act of seduction, first of my subject and then of the reader. I must convince the widow of the man who smoked for 50 years and died in six months, horribly, of lung cancer, to open their life to me in one afternoon. And when she tells me about sprinkling his after-shave on her pillow, my heart leaps because I have found a way to communicate her loss.

I must persuade the mother of a girl in Utah who disappeared 12 years ago, presumably snatched and murdered by serial killer Ted Bundy, to tell me how that horror shaped her family's life. And I must show her that I am different from the reporter who posed as a cop to get in her front door. And when she shows me the front porch light switch, left on 12 years before for the teenager due home that night, and the piece of tape on it that has made sure it has stayed burning, my heart leaps.

7 P.M.

Pawtuxet Village, Rhode Island

In the labor room at Kent County Memorial Hospital, Jackie Rushton rose from the stretcher, her face pale and smeared with tears. A nurse

pressed the fetal pulse detector against her abdomen, a taut mound stretched by seven months of pregnancy. The detector was blue, the size and shape of a pocket flashlight with earphones attached, and Jackie Rushton's eyes fixed on the nurse who strained to hear the bird-like beating of her baby's heart.

"Here's the heartbeat," the nurse said after several moments of silence. "It's 126 and it's fine."

If there's a heartbeat, why isn't she giving me the earphones so I can listen? Jackie thought. That's what the doctor always does when I have my checkups. First he listens, and then he says, "Here's the heartbeat. Listen." She didn't say, "Here's the heartbeat. Listen."

"I've lost the baby. The baby's gone."

Clearly, the writer doesn't always have to be present at the moment the story occurs. By its nature, narrative writing is an act of reconstruction, as in the opening of this piece that re-created the traumatic, but ultimately successful, birth of a baby.

Hannah Rushton had already been born by the time I heard the story of her emergency birth, but her parents' memories were still fresh the night a week later I sat in their living room. My friend Barbara Carton, a talented writer for *The Boston Globe*, uses the metaphor of portrait painting to describe her interviewing technique: You have to get people to sit still long enough to get every wrinkle. That's what I tried to do, and I pumped them for specifics. What happened then? What did it look like? What did you see? What did you say? How did you feel? What were you thinking at that moment?

Even so, I knew I couldn't reconstruct the night solely on the basis of their recollections, so I arranged to visit the maternity ward of the hospital. In the labor room, I saw the fetal detector and noticed that it looked like a pocket flashlight. I soaked in other details: the color of the room, the pictures on the wall, the overhead lamps in the operating room that looked like ice cream scoops. The use of such telling details represent what Joel Rawson, then deputy executive editor of the *Providence Journal-Bulletin*, called "pasting wafers" on a story, a reference to the last line of Chapter 9 in Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*: "The red sun was pasted in the sky like a fierce wafer." Wafers are the images that make the reader see with the writer's eyes. They are the gold that the feature writer must pan for in every interview.

Donald Murray, writing coach for *The Boston Globe*, advises that stories start as near the end as possible. For the story of Hannah

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Rushton's birth, I looked for the moment where the outcome was in doubt. It had to be the point when Jackie thought her baby had died and the nurse was lying about the heartbeat. And that, I knew, had to be my lead since I figured readers would want, need, to know what was going to happen, and I could make them read until the end to find out. If there's a trick to feature writing, it's deceptively simple: Grab the throat and never let go.

And remember: Much of what you write will be discarded. Only a phrase on some draft pages will remain in the published version. In the beginning, lower your critical standards and accept whatever pap flows from your keyboard. The writing you think is wonderful will later prove to be dreck. The stuff you know is dreck will point you in the direction of better writing.

The only way to improve a piece of writing is to rewrite and rewrite and rewrite and . . .

4 A.M.

Silver Spring, Maryland

To me, writing has always seemed like a roller coaster ride, dizzying heights of excitement and dips into valleys of despair.

Let's pick a point, arbitrarily, right after I've published a feature. Let's say it appeared on page one and people have said they liked it. I'm elated. That lasts a few seconds, replaced immediately by despair. "The story was a fluke," a little voice whispers. "Just a lucky break. You'll never be able to match it again. In fact, you'll probably never get another story idea again, and your bosses will realize you were just a flash in the pan."

But then another story idea appears; either my editor comes up with one or an idea occurs to me. I'm high again and as I launch into the reporting I start on a roll. But then an interview falls through, or I can't get to somebody. I'm back in the pits again. The only solution is to keep slogging away.

Have I got a story? That's what I'm asking myself as I come back to the office. I realize I can't let my boss know this. So I start pitching the story, and myself, and slowly, start climbing upwards again, convinced maybe there is a story here after all. But then I sit down to write and I realize it was a mirage. I start to sweat, the clock is ticking. Suddenly, at the very point of disaster, when I have hit what mountain climbers and runners call "the wall," I seem to get

a second wind and push ahead and finish the piece.

I am at once elated, and terrified. What if I got everything wrong? Are my notes accurate? Have I checked everything? At 4:00 that morning, I wake up. "Oh Christ," the little voice says. "His middle initial isn't C." I race to my briefcase, fish out my notes. Yes, it is C. I go back to bed, and spend the rest of the night picking apart each paragraph.

The paper appears in the driveway at 6 A.M. This time, I vow, I won't get it. Or if I do, I won't look at my story. At 6:01 I'm outside, tearing it out of the plastic wrapper that never keeps it dry when it rains. But no, I won't look.

I look.

It looks okay.

I go to work. I hope no one notices me. I hope they crowd around my desk. I hope they forget I'm there. I hope they lift me on their shoulders. "Good story," a friend says.

"Sure," the voice says. "They're just being nice."

Someone else says it. I begin to wonder. Maybe it was okay after all. Maybe my wife was right after all. I reassess. "Hey, it's a damn fine story. One of my best. Hey, maybe it will win a prize? . . .

"Oh God, what am I going to do tomorrow?"

Christopher Scanlan is a national correspondent for Knight-Ridder newspapers based in Washington, D.C. He has written award-winning feature stories as a staff writer for the *Providence Journal-Bulletin* and the *St. Petersburg Times* and has contributed freelance articles to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *Miami Herald*, and more than a dozen other newspapers, magazines and textbooks. He is the editor of the book, *How I Wrote the Story*, a collection of accounts exploring the newswriting process.

**A**h, if every newspaper feature editor or assigning editor at every magazine would dash off a memo like the one below, what a great profession it would be for developing writers. Unfortunately, most editors are too busy or just aren't the teacher types. All too often, you as a writer will be on your own. You'll have to read books, take courses, and experiment to develop your writing skills. However, if you do find an editor who will act as a mentor, seize the opportunity. If you are a freelancer, go to him or her as often as you can, even if the pay is better somewhere else. Learn what you can while someone is there to teach.

## Memo to a New Feature Writer

*Donald M. Murray*

From: Donald M. Murray

Re: Writing skills

You have been given this new assignment because you have established your ability to write copy that is lively, makes the reader feel as well as think, and is not always based on a hard news peg. You have earned a reputation as a good reporter *and* a good writer. Congratulations — but don't forget the relationship between the two: you are now a feature reporter *and* writer.

We'll have some assignments for you, but we expect you to come up with your own ideas most of the time. We won't buy all of them, but whether we give you the go-ahead or not, we want you to remember — and to remind us — how much we need your ideas. Editors sit; reporters walk. Your ability to write well is based on your ability to see well, and we want you on the street, discovering what is extraordinary in what has become ordinary for the rest of us. We want to know what you catch out of the corner of your eye, what you overhear being said and not said, what you discover when you observe our world from your own point of view. We hope you'll continue to be surprised at what you find and that you'll surprise us and our readers.

Don't underestimate the importance of what you are doing. When I broke into the business, features were considered frills. They were usually assigned to women — or men who were considered slightly womanly: sensitive and rather literary. Our real job was to deliver hard news to the reader. Period. But when I look back in my mental scrapbook I find many of the features I wrote have worn far longer and better than the accounts of fires and shootings and elections and press conferences that were reported with traditional professionalism.

Hard news is still our first priority, but it is delivered today by radio and television as well as newspapers. People read today to learn what and when and who and where, but they also read to discover why and how and what it will mean in the future.

Features give us depth and implication; they put people in the story; they make the reader think and care. Features are read and

clipped and passed around and photocopied and are often the real reason that readers buy our product.

Don't forget all you learned about reporting. The feature writer is a reporter first of all, and the more you work to make your writing perceptive, insightful, stimulating, and moving—the more you learn to write so that you can capture the world and hold it up for our examination—the better reporter you will become, because the writer sees better—and more—than the nonwriter.

### Features Predict the News

Features used to follow the news; now they often tell the reader—and the editor—what will be news in the days, weeks, months and years ahead. To discover this news that isn't already news, you have to develop a writer's eyes that can look at the world without hard news stereotypes, catch the trend before it is a trend, spot changes in society before there is a press conference to announce the change, find stories that are not based on an event.

Perceptive, probing features give depth and texture to our coverage of the news. Features put people on our pages who walk and talk and become real—and significant—as our readers meet them.

To do this you have to get off the phone and out of the office. One technique you'll find helpful is to work off deadline. Get to the press conference ahead of time and talk to the person who puts makeup on the presidential candidate, interview the nurse who helped "harvest" a heart for a transplant, find out how a loan officer decides who should get money—and who shouldn't. Stay on the scene of the accident after the ambulance is gone, visit the victim's family a week later.

James Baldwin tells us that "the importance of a writer . . . is that he is here to describe things which other people are too busy to describe." Go into family rooms and kitchens, the high school teachers' lounge and the student hangout, visit classes and assembly lines and the American Legion bar. Find out how people buy cars and fix up their homes. Listen and find out what they fear and want and need. Sit at lunch counters, stand in the unemployment line, listen to the talk of men at the Laundromat, spend a weekend night at a hospital emergency room. Hold up the world in which our readers live so they can see, appreciate, understand, and, perhaps, change it.

### Experiment With Your Writing

Many of these stories will not fit the disciplines of traditional news stories. You know that discipline. Use it, but stretch it, extend it, turn it inside out. Tell me how you think these stories should be written. It's your story, and the form of the story should grow out of what you have to say. Newspapers, like magazines, need to experiment with the normal forms of writing, use new forms, combine new and old forms to help our readers see and understand their world. Experiment not to call attention to yourself as a writer but to call attention to what you have to report. Help us find appropriate ways you can get out of the way and raise the curtain on the world.

Writing features, you'll have to pay attention to endings as well as leads, for the ending gives the reader a sense of completion. The ending is also remembered best after the story is over. Practice writing endings that give the reader a sense of completion, and you will find that knowing the ending before you draft the story may also give you a sense of direction during the writing.

Most features are people stories. We want names from you and more. The people in your stories have to walk right off the page. We need to see them physically, to hear them talk in quotes that sound like them, not you. We need to know the environment in which they live and work. We need to see them living and working. It is your job to reveal the person to the reader so that the reader sees people in action. As Mark Twain said, "Don't say the old lady screamed—bring her on and let her scream."

Let's keep talking about our craft. Share stories you like with me. Read about writing—you may want to start with the five volumes of *Paris Review* interviews published under the title of *Writers at Work* by Penguin. Visit the art museum and see what we can learn from the artist's vision of the world. Let's share what we learn from movies. Read nonfiction, fiction, poetry. Teach me whom I should read. You'll find me suggesting John McPhee, Toni Morrison, Charles Simic, Raymond Carver, Joan Didion, William Least Heat Moon, Wallace Stevens, George Simenon, William Maxwell, Susan Sheehan, William Kennedy, Eudora Welty, Graham Greene, Hilma Wolitzer, and all the other writers that keep me excited about writing.

Your stories also keep me interested in our craft. I can tell your stories even without looking at the byline. You write in your own voice. That's a rare quality, and we want you to work consciously at

developing your voice so that it fits a broad spectrum of stories. Voice gives the reader the illusion of a private conversation. An effective voice carries authority, underlines the writer's caring, cements all the elements in the story so they hold together, provides momentum that carries the reader along. Be aware of your writing voice, listen to how you are saying what you are saying, read aloud as you write and learn to use that gift of voice so easily, so naturally, so invisibly that the reader is not aware of a writer laboring away at the prose but feels that the story is not being read but experienced.

Let me know how I can help you look at the world with your eye and share what you learn in your own voice. Welcome aboard.

Donald M. Murray, who won the Pulitzer Prize for Editorial Writing, is a retired Professor of English at the University of New Hampshire. He has been writing coach at the *Providence Journal-Bulletin*, *The News Observer* and *The Raleigh Times* as well as other newspapers. His books include *Writing for Readers*, Globe Pequot Press, which is based on pieces he wrote for the staff while writing coach at *The Boston Globe*.

## End Words

### *Afterthoughts: More Points to Remember*

1. The types of feature stories are endless. The common factors for the best of them are exhaustive research, tenacious reporting and excellent writing.
2. Be sure to consider who your editors will be when looking for a feature writing job or a long-term freelance relationship. A lot of good writing at a newspaper or magazine is an indication that the editors are enlightened—i.e., they are producing an environment hospitable to good writers. Be careful about a paper or magazine with bad writing. Its management may well be so preoccupied with meeting deadlines and filling pages that they have forgotten about good writing.
3. The writer most in demand in newspaper feature sections is the generalist who can turn the quick story and do it with style. This is the entry position in any feature section. However, in the long run, it will not hurt to develop a specialty.
4. Today the most sophisticated writing in feature sections and



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magazines is probably closer akin to the nonfiction novel than to the traditional breaking newspaper story. The feature writer will have to know all the techniques of reporting and will develop central characters that the readers get to know and care about.

5. Pick your own style and field of interest. Just as in baseball, a freelancer or staff writer doesn't have to be able to play all of the positions. Some people are pitchers, some are infielders, others are outfielders. Occasionally there will be a Bo Jackson, who can switch ball games, but it is not necessary. In writing, some people will shine at writing small tidbits for gossip columns, others will prosper by writing features as complex as nonfiction novels. Novice writers should take chances in order to find out which styles are best for them.

6. Even the best feature writers despair about the quality of their work, even when it is outstanding. Writing is a psychologically difficult profession, but at its best it is also mentally and spiritually uplifting for the writer and the readers.

7. Feature writing is no longer just the domain of newspaper feature sections and magazines. These days features appear on front pages of the newspapers and in news broadcasts. There's a reason for this. Readers (and viewers) want stories about people; they want to vicariously inhabit other worlds and other people's lives. Feature writing does this best.

8. Many of the best feature writers learned to be reporters first, but they always had a love for the written word and outgrew the straight news story. They intuitively know: "A newspaper should be a document of the times with all the human drama and emotion of those times." Those who follow that dictum as set forth years ago by reporter Sue Hutchinson are rewarded with the best assignments, with more time to do their stories, with more job satisfaction, and sometimes with contest awards.

9. The best writers will agree they are only as good as their editors. The best editors are not only good at helping fix stories but also recognize talent and allow writers to do their best work. That may sound obvious, but with so many deadlines and so many pages to fill, raw talent can get overlooked.

### *Exercises*

1. Study your local newspaper's feature section. Note the different types of writing. Detail its strengths and weaknesses. Are the ideas creative? Are the stories breaking new ground or just serving up old clichés? Do you learn something new each time you read it? How is the writing? How do they localize national issues? On the continuum from a breaking news story to a nonfiction novel, where do most of the stories fall?

2. Read one or more of these newspapers' feature sections: *The Seattle Times*, the *Wall St. Journal*, the *New York Times*, *The Orange County Register*, the *Miami Herald*, *The Dallas Morning News*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *St. Petersburg Times*, and *The Boston Globe*. These are just a few of the country's top papers. In them you will find some great writing, but you also will find some mediocre writing. Don't let the worst stories guide you. There is plenty of bad writing everywhere. Emulate only the best. The field is overrun with average writers, but the best are always in demand.

3. Read some alternative papers. Often they are more alive and prove a better training ground than staid traditional papers. Find papers like *The Village Voice*, *The Boston Phoenix*, *Phoenix (Arizona) New Times*, and your local alternative papers. They usually take a lot of freelance material.

4. If you are a novice and want to build clips, look for the tiny neighborhood, suburban or school papers. Analyze one. Make a list of stories that you might write for the publication. If you are serious about this, go see the editor and ask about writing for the paper. Work for free if necessary. Use it to experiment and test your writing styles while building a clip file that will eventually get you a job or freelance assignments.

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### *Further Reading*

1. *Writing for Your Readers: Notes on the Writer's Craft from The Boston Globe* by Donald M. Murray (Globe Pequot Press, 1983). Essays on writing by Murray while a writing coach at *The Boston Globe*.

2. *How I Wrote the Story* edited by Christopher Scanlan (Providence Journal Company, 1986). Providence *Journal* stories with reporters telling how they wrote the story. Also discusses the writing process.

## How the Pros Do It

### *Writing Sample Number 1*

"Mr. Lucky," by Jay Hamburg of *The Orlando Sentinel*, is the kind of feature story most novices should learn to write. It's a slice of life that newspapers love. These stories are written in a day or so. They have humanity in them and let us see how other people live and work.

As nice as they are, they probably will not win many prizes, but they, in combination with other, perhaps harder, news stories, will give a feature or news section a good story mix. A slice-of-life story will be hard for a freelancer to place at a large newspaper because staff members can do them relatively quickly. However, freelancers learning the business can, and should, do these articles, to sharpen their talents at campus, neighborhood or small weekly newspapers, which don't have big staffs. A story like this in your clip file won't hurt in trying to land a job at a newspaper or magazine. Of course, it should be part of a greater mix.

Notice how leanly written this story is. What is left out is as important as what is used. Quotes are lean and to the point. Description is used only on those things central to the story and it helps move the story along. Notice how much the story depends on the reporter watching as well as listening to Mr. Lucky. Also notice how the writer is in control and even breaks a convention to keep story flow alive by never mentioning the man's real name until the reader is deep in the story.

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### **Mr. Lucky Ends Mr. Clean Career Marion Edwards Spent 37 Years Scrubbing Restaurant's Pots, Pans**

By Jay Hamburg  
*The Orlando Sentinel*, Florida

Mr. Lucky leaned over the large metal pot that sat on the restaurant kitchen's floor. The 20-gallon pot was as high as Mr. Lucky's knees, and on its curved steel sides were the remnants of red sauce, and on the bottom was a thick

Lead and description of a pot set up the rest of the story.

- coating of baked-on food.
- Uses irony of name. After 37 years of scrubbing pots, washing pans and stacking metal bowls, this was Mr. Lucky's last pot. He is 64, and despite a painful ailment that makes his movements unsteady, he has held on for almost four decades to a job known for its turnover. He held on for his family.
- Lean quote integral to story focus. "When you've got a family, you come on in and work your heart out and ask the Lord to help you."
- Background information. There was a retirement party for him Friday at work, but Mr. Lucky completed his last shift at the Villa Nova restaurant Thursday night.
- He started there Dec. 19, 1950, when he was 27. He worked at night after finishing his day job at Rollins College, where he was in charge of food supplies for the company that ran the cafeteria.
- At the college, he was responsible for keeping inventories, and he also stacked big slabs of beef. In 1963, though, he noticed a numbing in his arms and feet and a weakening of those muscles. He couldn't lift the heavy produce. The doctors told him it was multiple sclerosis.
- The doctors said he was eligible for disability payments from the government, but Mr. Lucky had three sons and a daughter, and one of the sons suffered from profound handicaps. Although his wife worked as a housekeeper at Rollins, he needed more money than a Social Security check would provide. So that year, Mr. Lucky, unable to continue hoisting meat and produce, became a full-time pot washer at the Villa Nova, the Winter Park restaurant known for its elegant atmosphere and Italian cuisine.
- First time we see Mr. Lucky's real name. It was there that Marion Edwards got the name by which all his co-workers knew him. Because the wife of a former owner couldn't remember his name, she decided to call him Lucky. And as Edwards aged and the restaurant changed hands, the younger workers and managers came to address him more formally as Mr. Lucky.
- Uses the pot to move back to the present. With jerky movements, Mr. Lucky spun the big pot around late Thursday, lifted it, walked awkwardly to the large metal sink and dropped it in. He sprayed hot water over it and steam rose.
- Mr. Lucky's hands are scarred because he sometimes picks up hot skillets that chefs slide to him across an inside window ledge. His fingers are numb, so he doesn't always know what has happened until he sees the blister the next day.

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"Sometimes I didn't like what I was doing, but I couldn't do anything else," Edwards said, as he took a scraper to the bottom of the pot. "But I learned to like it. It's just like any other job. You do it so long, you know what has to be done and go and do it. It's not a get-rich job, but it's an honest job."

Mr. Lucky cannot lift his feet very well when he walks, and back in November, he tripped and smacked his head on the floor. He needed five stitches.

"Lucky, you're a hazard to your health," Tom Lutz, the new owner, told him. Lutz, who acquired the Villa Nova in 1981, worried, too, that Mr. Lucky's next fall might injure others in the kitchen, where many people work around flames and knives. So Lutz persuaded him to retire.

None of Villa Nova's owners through the years provided pension plans, but Lutz said he will give him a retirement bonus.

"He said he'll take care of me," said Mr. Lucky, who doesn't have any plans for retirement. Maybe he'll see some baseball games with his wife. He never had the time or energy before.

Mr. Lucky took a metal scrubber to the outside of the pot. There have been a lot of changes since he graduated from the old Hungerford High School in Eatonville in 1941. His disabled son died. Another son is a musician. The third works in construction. His daughter is a nurse's aide. His grandson, the first in his family to go to college, is studying computers in North Carolina. "I feel good about that," he said.

He scraped hard with a metal spatula again. It is the same one he has used for 37 years, and he had worn it down to a jagged edge while bending over the deep sink. "As long as I'm in a crooked position, I'm okay. When I straighten up, it hurts. . . . A lot of people that have this are in wheelchairs. And some of them are dead. So I think I'm pretty lucky."

Mr. Lucky said he thinks his illness is affecting his mind, though. He can't remember things as well. "I could have a dream at night and remember it. I can't remember dreams anymore. I used to dream about this place—I'd still be out here washing pots."

He sprayed the pot another time with hot water. "This is the last one. There've been a lot of times I wished that."

Watch how the metal spatula returns later in the story.

Three-sentence quote tells us reams about Mr. Lucky.

Throughout the night, waiters and waitresses came by and offered their farewells. "I can't imagine how he's done it," said assistant chef Jeffrey Boley, 27. "I'd have gone crazy after one year. But he comes to work early. He's always grinding away."

Mr. Lucky washed off the pot and carried it off. Then he wiped up around the sink. "Last time," he said. He kissed his fingers and then slapped them on the metal ledge over which so many hot skillets had come.

"Danny," he said.

"Goodbye, Mr. Lucky," said Diennel Gaudron, a 37-year-old dishwasher who left Haiti four years ago.

"We'll see you, old pal," Mr. Lucky said. "You tell the boys to be good, and I'll holler at you sometime."

Mr. Lucky paused by the sink. He pulled open a drawer and placed some belongings in a white plastic bag.

"I feel like I don't have a place to go now—to be with people. I'll find something to do. If not, I'll get out and walk. Go down by the highway and watch the cars go by. Go into town and talk with some of my friends. I'll find something. I've just got to work into it."

Mr. Lucky rode the bus to work every day from his home near the Villa Nova, and at night one of the waiters or waitresses would drive him home. "Last ride home," he said, walking to the door. "Last ride home."

He checked his watch. It was just past 11 P.M. as he headed outside with the white plastic bag by his side. In it, he carried his worn metal spatula.

Image at the end  
that will stay with  
the reader.