

CHAPTER TWO

Assignments That Make Great Stories

Writing coach and teacher Roy Peter Clark is about to tell you how to find great feature story ideas. However, if you are a freelance writer, finding ideas is only the beginning. Next, you have to be sure the ideas match your market. Even staff writers have to do this. An article about a football player might not fly in a feature section, but an article about how his family copes with the on-field violence will. On the national level, you might think *Sports Illustrated* for the player himself, but *Redbook* for his family. But that's the obvious stuff. On a more subtle level, page through the women's magazines at a big newsstand. I did it recently and found 36 different women's magazines. *LEAR'S* won't buy what *Good Housekeeping* does, nor will *Elle* buy what *Parenting* does. That's why many freelancers specialize in certain markets. When an idea comes along that's right for their market, they instinctively know it will appeal to their audience, and, equally important, to their editor. For in the end, an idea is only a good one when an editor wants it and guides it into print.

Finding Feature Story Ideas

Roy Peter Clark

The great journalists—reporters or editors—see the world as a storehouse of story ideas. They have a form of X-ray vision that allows them to see human action behind the thick walls of faceless institu-

tions. They are curious about everything, are fascinated with how things work, and live to uncover secrets.

Where do good story ideas come from? The answer is everywhere. They come from reporters and assigning editors, of course, but also from publishers and their spouses, copyeditors, copy clerks, readers and sources. Any idea can and should be tested. No idea is inherently bad. In fact, a story concept that seems to lead through dense jungles and impenetrable thickets may be the only path to lost cities and buried treasures.

The most important source of story ideas is your newspaper and its competitors. Newspapers are filled with undeveloped stories, announcements of meetings and events, of tiny clues that could lead to interesting narratives. One day I read in the paper an announcement concerning a young minister planning to spend the weekend preaching from a little house built atop a telephone pole. He called it his "polepit," and all were invited to hear him preach the gospel from on high.

The story reminded me of those ancient hermits who would preach from mountaintops or high trees or poles. So I rushed down to interview the minister. As soon as I arrived at his church, I understood what this event was all about. His church was on a street with about a dozen other churches. What I had was a story about this town's competition for souls, and the preacher's publicity stunt could be judged in that light. The seed for the story was the little announcement in the paper.

There are secret stories even in the press release describing the new phone book. When I received that assignment, I challenged myself to take this lemon of a story and make lemonade. I first thought that I would turn the story into a book review, imagining the phone book as having more characters than a Russian novel. Someone suggested that I call the first name listed in the book, but it turned out to be AAAA Roofing, followed by all the businesses with AAA initials. There was a business story there, perhaps. But I found my way while looking up the last name in the book: "Z. Zyzor." What a strange name, I thought, and what must it be like to be on the bottom of every alphabetical listing ever conceived?

I called the number and got the cafeteria of the local post office. I dialed again, and got the same number. No one knew of any Z. Zyzor. I used the city directory and discovered that, indeed, the address next to the name was that of the post office. I called the person-

nel department of the post office, but got nowhere.

When I had almost given up hope of solving this little mystery, I got a call from the postmaster. "I hear you've been asking about Z. Zyzor."

My palms were sweating. Finally he told me the story.

Back in 1948, the letter carriers decided to pitch in money to get a telephone installed at the post office for their personal use. "We invented the name Z. Zyzor. We told our families: 'If you need me in an emergency, just look up the last number in the book.' "

That is how a story about the new phone book made the front page of the local section on a pretty busy news day.

But what about reporters who are not so ingenious? What if they have learned, perhaps from bad editors, to see news, and the world, in the most conventional ways? What kind of coaching will help them open their eyes and ears? Try these approaches:

Find the Person Behind the Story, and the Story Behind the Person

A follow-up to a story about a postal rate increase became a tale about the unpopularity of postal clerks. The story began with this lead:

"When Marion W. McDonald went to work for the postal service back in 1945, you could mail a letter for three cents and a post-card for a penny."

After a description of the rate increases, there is this quote:

" 'Shakespeare could explain why the post office gets such bad press,' said McDonald to a reporter. 'Do you remember Mark Antony's words over the body of Julius Caesar?'

"The reporter looked down at his notes like a nervous school-boy.

"McDonald peered hard into the reporter's eyes. His forum was framed by scales, meters and postal charts. He spoke his lines accurately and with conviction:

" 'The evil that men do lives after them, the good is oft interred with their bones.' "

I was fascinated and delighted by the postal worker who quoted Shakespeare. I wanted my readers to share that same experience.

Go One Step Beyond What Is Expected of You

I remember reviewing the movie *Midnight Express*, a powerful film about a young American trapped in a brutal Turkish prison. Some other reviewers wondered whether the film had been unfair to the Turkish people, depicting them as torturers and sadists.

I felt the need to go one step beyond the review, which led me to a column idea. I called the project manager, who defended the film, and was surprised how easy it was to get the deputy Turkish ambassador to the United Nations on the phone. It took two simple phone calls. "For years we've been stereotyped as being brutal, terrible, the mustachioed, scimitar-bearing people," said Altemur Kilic.

"Unfortunately, this film uses all the tricks in the book to come out against the Turkish people. As an American, when you come out of the movie house you come out with hatred against the Turks — not with hatred against the Turkish prison system. If I were paranoid, I would say there was Greek or Armenian money behind it."

The young reporter should know: 1) That he or she can reach almost anyone in the world on the telephone at almost any time; 2) That making just one more call may give you just what you need to construct a great story.

Don't Be Afraid to Use Your Life as a Mirror of Some Larger Reality

In the days before Madonna and MTV, I tried my best to protect my daughters from Barbie. "I hate Barbie," I wrote, "I hate her grown-up polyethylene breasts, her glamorously expensive outfits, her superstar image, her camera, her microphone, her motor home, her sports car, her bedroom set, and especially her blond boyfriend Ken with his rose-tinted sunglasses, his mink coat, and his suede jumpsuit."

I checked the clips and found the name of another man who hated Barbie. He lived in a town called Oakland, Oregon, and I got his phone number from directory assistance. The man, Bill Barton, disapproved of the way Mattel was marketing Barbie. He was concerned that she was too sexy and flashy for little girls, and that she was being marketed in a way that conditioned little kids to be aggressive consumers. What makes Barton's criticism of Barbie relevant? He invented her.

Journalists live in the world, too, and their experiences may

lead to legitimate story ideas. Perhaps there are suddenly a number of houses on your block for sale. Or garbage trucks are tearing up your street. Or it seems that traffic problems make getting to work more difficult. Or you can't find places to park downtown. While it is a conflict of interest to write a story that offers you personal advantage, it is right to assume that your problems and concerns may be shared by many other citizens.

To the Tuned-in Journalist, Even Nothing Can Be Something

When the local bluenoses failed to raise a protest about the arrival of the stage play "Oh! Calcutta!," it inspired this story:

"Like the floozy she is, 'Oh! Calcutta!' will strut her stuff into town this week, spend the night and move on.

"The controversial nudie musical makes its first St. Petersburg appearance in a one-night stand at 8 P.M. Wednesday at the Bayfront Center.

"Although the play faces protest from some church and community leaders in other Florida cities, such as Melbourne and Lakeland, 'Oh! Calcutta!' comes to St. Petersburg without a whimper of opposition."

When I learned that the play was facing protests in other Florida communities, I assumed that protesters would be out in force in St. Petersburg. I braced myself for their emergence, and prepared to write a story about it. At first I was disappointed when there was no outcry, but then realized that the lack of protest was a break from the trend, providing me with an even better story. Nothing became something.

Great Feature Writers and Their Editors Cultivate an Eye for the Offbeat

John McPhee of *The New Yorker* wrote a piece on Atlantic City by visiting the locations mentioned on the Monopoly board, including Jail.

Jeff Klinkenberg learned the value of an offbeat perspective at the now defunct *Miami News*, an afternoon paper which always looked for a fresh angle on a story.

Jeff, who went on to become an outdoors writer for the *St. Petersburg Times*, once found a young man who set up a NERF-ball

fantasy basketball league in his own garage: "By day he is the mild-mannered vice president of a small family business which stuffs plastic bags with nuts and bolts. At night, on the basketball court, things are different. Terry Lewis, 20, is a superstar . . . It's only a one-man basketball league. The applause rings only in his imagination. But Terry Lewis has scored 25,000 points in 780 games in his garage-turned-gym. He's a holy terror."

An old army medal in a drawer inspires a reminiscence; a piece of sheet music becomes a story on its composer; a high school year-book becomes a window onto 20 years of educational change.

A waitress takes an order, not on a pad, but on a hand-held computer. A small public school is established at a large GE plant. Little kids are collecting baseball cards not for fun, but for investment. Suddenly a grain of narrative appears before the writer's eyes.

But good writers also go against the grain, avoiding what Don Murray calls "clichés of vision." Handicapped people are not always heroic. Women and old people are not always victims. Capitalists can be altruistic. Some writers even develop strong counter-intuitive sensibilities about the news in their own paper. They wait and watch, weigh the evidence, and find another way.

These are just some of the "idea skills" that can be passed from editor to reporter, and back again.

Many of these attitudes come from a rich life of reading. Sadly, too many writers fail to read their own newspaper. The smart ones scour the paper for new ideas and angles. They might spend an afternoon poring through current periodicals in the library. They wisely read books which carry them beyond the boundaries of their special interests. Through their reading they can see the world through many lenses.

The productive feature writers get so many ideas they need places to store them. Those places may be in a computer file, or in a compost heap of papers, or in a folder, notebook or journal. Ideas are tricky creatures; if you don't capture them in words, they can fly off into space, where you may have to pray for their return.

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The rich and famous have access to the press, and writers seek them out. Their good, and often not so good, deeds dominate the news. But we as writers can't forget the ordinary people. The beekeeper, the nun who has devoted her life to hospice work, the woman who fights for better safety standards after her husband dies on the job, the outstanding teacher, perhaps even your own mother. They all have potential stories. Most often their stories are told in small features in newspapers or in the front or back sections of magazines. Often these small features will provide writers entrée to do full-length stories. Indeed, many magazines will first try out new freelancers with small assignments about ordinary people, and if they work, the assignments will grow in numbers and often in story length. Sometimes that will mean writing about more important people, but it might just mean developing a full-length feature about an obscure person with an extraordinary story to tell or simply a story so rich in emotion and detail that it merits a magazine-length story. No one is better at writing about everyday people than Madeleine Blais. Her stories have earned her a Pulitzer Prize in feature writing and respect among her peers. Here she shares how she finds the people who help make award-winning stories, and how she makes those people come alive on the pages.

Don't Forget the "Ordinary" People

Madeleine Blais

All journalists live by certain private treasured precepts about what they are willing to do or not to do in order to get a story, and of all the lofty principles I hold dear, none is more lofty than my refusal to interview mayors.

By "mayors" I mean that whole raft of humankind, actually usually mankind, who occupy some great official seat in worldly matters and whose primary goal in communication is obfuscation, preening self-advancement or windy filibuster. What this means for me as a journalist is that most of the people I interview are obscure, and I am interviewing them because something in their unsung lives has struck me as important and worth documenting. The advantage to interviewing the kind of people I interview is that I almost always start out liking them, or if not liking them, at least appreciating something about their circumstances that makes them in my mind worth the intense attention of a full-length feature story.

How Does One Find These People?

One source for these stories, obviously, is in the regular news pages, when someone formerly obscure has been thrust into sudden prominence because of what is usually a cataclysmic, sometimes tragic, event. I am a great reader of newspapers and have been all my reading life; by the third grade I possessed that journalist's addiction to current events; when my classmates discussed the comics, I recited headlines. Even then I used to wonder what happened to the people in the news after they stopped being in the news. This curiosity about the human condition (or plain nosiness) never really left me, and so I often pick as subjects people whose situation continues to haunt me after the glare of publicity has dimmed.

Another source is word of mouth.

People are always suggesting that someone they know would make an interesting interview. This is not always encouraging: They could mean their Aunt Myrtle, who makes macrame thingies for her annual church fair, or their new neighbor, an expert on mung bean seedlings. My suggestion is to do your best to find out what they find so compelling, keeping in mind that as a feature writer you want not just a story, but also a plot. The best definition of the difference between a story and a plot comes from E.M. Forster. "The king died and the queen died is a story. The king died and the queen died of grief is a plot."

Here's an example of a word-of-mouth suggestion that worked. It came from a friend who arrived in the office, filled with enthusiasm from a dinner party she had attended the night before.

"There were some people there that would make a story," she said.

Who?

"This woman named Hannah Kahn. She's in her early seventies."

So are a lot of people.

"For 40 years she has sold furniture at the same store in Miami."

Am I being gently mocked?

"But really she's a poet."

A lot of people think they're poets.

"Who's been anthologized in more than 30 languages."

That's impressive. But still, she's not famous; we're talking a minor writer.

"She lives with her daughter who has Down's Syndrome."

A lot of people live with people in their families who are damaged. Situations like that are hard to describe well because they have so much built-in sentimentality. One has to fight hard to strike more than one note. Everything's too smooth, like scaling a sheer cliff. Where's the foothold?

"This daughter, Vivian, goes to a class in genetics at the University of Miami Medical School every year so the students can see the kind of progress a Down's Syndrome person can make in their life with the proper care. Vivian also writes poems."

That's more than heartwarming: that's news.

"For years Hannah told her daughter she was 16, in the belief that that would make her more acceptable to the small children who were her same age socially. But now Hannah is ill, she has cancer. Vivian's fortieth birthday is coming up, and she wants to tell her the truth. . . ."

There's a foothold, an edge, a point of pure tension. In the end, I spent weeks with Hannah and Vivian, on and off, discovering that in some fierce maternal way, Hannah's greatest poem was her daughter.

Everyday Sources of Feature Stories

Very young journalists are often led to believe that they should not be involved in their communities; they are encouraged in a kind of carpetbagging mentality that makes them think of themselves as not quite accountable: The person you treat unfairly in print one day will never materialize in your life again. The older you get, the more likely you are to attach yourself to the fabric of a community, especially if you invest in a house or have children. Sometimes, the everydayness of your very life becomes a source of stories. I like first-person stories, and if I were an editor I would routinely ask my best news writers to write about themselves, if only because the compassion and goodwill they are likely to bring to a personal story might serve them well in their coverage of strangers. But also, when we write about ourselves, we see grayness, nuance, something other than that sharp division that characterizes most news in which people have either won the lottery or they lost it bad.

Once in a while one will meet an anonymous someone in the course of one's daily life who seems somehow worthy of coverage. I once did a piece called "Monica's Barrel," about a Jamaican immi-

grant who sent huge cardboard cylinders back to her homeland every few months or so. She worked, long hours and hard ones, as a live-in domestic five days a week, but on her free days she devoted herself to trolling for goodies at the flea markets, the sidewalk bazaars, in her own cupboards. The impulse to send these barrels seemed to me almost religious: to give thanks for her life here and to appease the gods of envy. After the piece appeared, someone asked how it was I had discovered Monica, and I explained that her friend Velma sometimes babysat for my children, and whenever the children had outgrown toys or clothes, Velma would take them to give to Monica for her barrels.

Often, a writer will get a letter or a phone call from a member of the vast unknown public pitching a story, usually concerning something personal in their own lives, almost always of a saddening nature. One develops a certain antenna for the contents of these letters, and the ones in which every word is underlined or put in caps or in contrasting ink usually come from someone so, shall we say, fevered, that they are too disordered to convey the news in their life on their own. Even so, I made it my policy to investigate every request. In the case of Trish, the story of a schizophrenic bag lady, the letter came from her sister Meg, an advertising executive. Meg's letter was so measured and sympathetic and urgent that I remember calling her back within seconds of opening it, literally seconds. I had no doubts about the worthiness of the story: Here was a large family, eight children in all, in which everybody was willing to talk for the record, names and all, about an important social ill.

Making People Come Alive on Paper

The disadvantage to interviewing the Trishes and Hannahs and Monicas of this world is mostly one of a literary nature.

In one regard, the jobs of a feature writer and a fiction writer are not dissimilar. If novelists are faced with the artistic challenge of getting people who are not alive to seem alive, the journalist faces essentially the same problem: how do you make people who are alive in reality come alive on paper?

This is when I sometimes wish I could break my own rule: generally, mayors and governors and presidents are already quite familiar to readers and there is no extra pressure to prove their existence, to round it out by describing how they talk, or walk, or to

find the identifying gesture that stands as a symbol for their whole personality.

I wish I had a surefire formula to pass along to ensure the easy discharge of this task, but I don't. My main suggestion will seem frightfully paltry, but since it has worked for me I pass it along in the hope that maybe it will work for you.

There are, we all know, two parts to the interviewing process. One is the formal part, where the journalist is officially on duty, notebook out, pen poised, face fixed in an expression of pure attention. Generally we are intent on getting down what the person says, and may be less attuned to how they are saying it or to what they look like at that moment.

And then there is also the down time, those casual, informal interludes when perhaps we are walking alongside our subject or helping him or her prepare the coffee that has been offered or clear the clutter off the couch.

It is during those times, those unofficial moments, that the subject is engaging in the gestures that often constitute the most telling physical description. My basic advice is to get time on your side. Try to become the world's champion at hanging out. I always advise young reporters to take it as a rule of thumb that they should generally be willing to work twice as hard as anyone twice their age.

One way to make time your ally is to work on several stories at once. Since they will usually be in various states of completion, each will be demanding a different aspect of your creative energies. The image that comes to mind is of a cook overseeing a complicated menu in which some things are baking slowly, others simmering in pots, while something else must be quickly deep-fried at the same time fresh ingredients are being assembled for yet a new item.

For example, I began the story about Hannah and Vivian the day I heard about them, with a phone call to Hannah. We met in person soon after, but she professed reluctance. "I don't know, the spotlight, who needs it?" I said I was still interested if she changed her mind and she could call me anytime.

That was that, for several months. I did my other stories. And then by chance we ran into each other at one of those outdoor arts festivals, a Miami winter tradition. In our quick conversation, I could sense her ambivalence. When I called the next day, she said yes.

Then the hard part began. I had to make this ordinary person come alive on paper. To do this I began stalking the colorful descrip-

