

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.

Roy Peter Clark is a writer and teacher of writing. He is dean of the faculty at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, a journalism teaching institution supported by the stock of the *St. Petersburg Times*. He has established a national newspaper center at the institute to hold seminars and workshops for editors, reporters and teachers. He is editor of *Best Newspaper Writing, 1979-85*, and is working on a book entitled *Coaching Writers: The Human Side of Editing*.

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-

tive phrase. One afternoon I found myself with Vivian in the apartment she shared with her mother. We were waiting for the older woman to return home from work and we were both looking out the picture window in the living room that faced the parking lot. In the distance I could see Hannah, her silver hair at the steering wheel, and I watched as she nearly hopped out of the car and headed home at a fast clip, an unmistakable no-nonsense brisk pace. At the time my first child was barely two years old, and I was touched by Hannah's movement, recognizing it as the always hurried pace of mothers with young children, and that is how I described it in the piece.

The basic point is that as a reporter you need to marshal all your senses, not just your ears, to come up with a rounded portrait.

I guess one of my pet peeves about reporting is that too often quotes seemed to be the only route reporters take to establish the character of the person they are talking about.

There's nothing wrong with quotes.

In fact, the way people speak often reveals a wealth of detail: their age, ethnic background, their fancifulness toward life, their level of education, their gender. Speech is a dense, rich code.

But too often, feature pieces seem to be an onslaught of uninterrupted quotes, the purpose of which has less to do with advancing the narrative than billboard advertising the reporter's pride at actually having compiled so many quotes.

The ability as readers to really hear what a person has to say is enhanced by some kind of word picture about what he or she looks like. But just as important as the color of someone's hair or eyes, and sometimes much more telling, are the gestures, all those mannerisms and habits, the pacing and the knuckle-cracking, the sighs and the strokes of the chin, all those outward signatures that stand for something inward.

In other words, listen hard, but also keep an eye on the little gestures and nuances that make your ordinary people special and make them come alive.

Madeleine Blais is an associate professor in the Department of Journalism at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and writes a twice-monthly column for *Newsday*. She was a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University in 1985-86 and won the Pulitzer Prize for feature writing in 1980 while at the *Miami Herald's Tropic* magazine.

End Words

Afterthoughts: More Points to Remember

1. Sometimes ideas alone are worth money. Magazines like *People* and *Money* pay local stringers to keep them supplied with a steady stream of ideas from around the country. Of course, the main sources of the stringers' ideas are their local newspapers. The passing news story is often the seed for a more in-depth story for the feature section or for a magazine.

2. When constructing a story, don't assume well-known or important people are too important to talk to you. Try. Most will take or return your calls. And if they don't, you have lost nothing.

3. Don't forget to tap into your own experiences to develop story ideas. Lifestyles include every facet of life and that includes every facet of your life. When you plan to travel, think travel stories. When you try a new food, think of the food sections. When your own life is touched by tragedy, probe to see how you can relate the experience to others. The more life experiences you have, the richer the source of story ideas you will become. In other words, read and write, but don't forget to live.

4. Take national issues and think how you can localize them. The best way to localize any story is to tell that issue through a living human being. In the words of Don Murray, don't write about a war or battle—write about the soldier in the battle. Another writer put it this way: Don't write about mankind, write about a man. Localizing a story is the perfect venue for doing this. In fact, the major issues, from AIDS to exercise, demand that they be told through experiences of local people.

5. When you get an idea, write it down before you forget it. Inspired ideas are fleeting; besides, there is nothing better during a dry spell than to turn on the computer, call up your idea file, and see a storehouse of excellent ideas that you had all but forgotten.

6. Don't forget the ordinary people. Listen to all story suggestions. Ask questions to find out why those who suggest them think the story is compelling enough for you to spend hours, days or weeks on. Most ideas will not pan out, but some will become the great stories of your writing career.

7. Look for stories with an edge, tension or a plot. Often asking yourself if they have a beginning, middle and end will help in making the decision on whether or not to pursue a story.

8. Never underestimate your region for potential story ideas. For years, reporters and editors at the *Star Tribune* in Minneapolis carped that all the Pulitzer Prize-winning stories were done in the more dynamic cities like New York, Miami, Dallas, or Los Angeles. Not in the quiet Midwest. Then the *Star Tribune's* competitor, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press Dispatch*, won two Pulitzer Prizes. People at the *Star Tribune* were rudely reminded that great story ideas are everywhere. Soon afterwards the *Star Tribune* won its own Pulitzer Prize.

9. Be flexible with your ideas. Often you will go into a story with one plan, but as the research and reporting develops, the original premise might change. Usually, it is best to go with what will make the better story. However, let your editor know if a story is taking a different tack than agreed upon. Established freelancers or staff writers often instinctively know when changes will be well received. But if you are a new freelancer it would be foolish to put your sale in jeopardy simply because you didn't make a call to the editor buying the story. Editors love to be kept informed, and they, too, want the best story.

Exercises

1. Start a clip and idea file. Use your computer, notebook or even a drawer or envelope. For a two-week period, see how many ideas you can develop from all your life experiences — from hobbies, emotions, family, TV, reading — everything. When an idea comes to you, write it down. Sometimes you will be just writing a few words, other times an avalanche of details will come to you. At the end of the two weeks, go back over your ideas, cull the best of them, and turn them into feature stories or into well-thought-out assignment ideas you can present to your editors. Of course, don't stop after two weeks. Keep the file active.

2. Again for a two-week period, read your hometown newspaper or newspapers every day, concentrating on the local news. Which stories are underdeveloped and have the potential for a richer story?

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Does the little item about a pizza chain opening in town mean the beginning of the end for the local family-owned pizza parlors? Is the teen auto accident death the beginning of a feature on teens and alcohol? At the end of the two weeks, see which stories could be turned into features. Continue the habit of studying your local papers for potential feature stories.

3. For another two weeks, read national magazines and papers like the *New York Times* for national trends. Write a brief note on how you would localize the stories. List some people who would know what is happening locally. Don't just list experts; what about the everyday people who might become the focal point of your story? And don't do everything from your desk and telephone; do legwork by visiting places that might give you insights into your story. To use the pizza chain example again: You read that national pizza chains are growing by leaps and bounds. A visit to a few family-run places might show that erratic quality and poor service might be what is doing them in. Only by an on-site visit would you and your readers get a feel for what is really happening.

Further Reading

1. *Free-Lancer and Staff Writer* by William L. Rivers and Alison R. Work (Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1986). A textbook for college students who have mastered basic writing and are interested in newspaper and magazine feature writing. It has plenty of sample articles, as well as advice on how to write and sell them.

2. *Best Newspaper Writing* edited by Don Fry (Poynter Institute for Media Studies, Annual since 1985). Contains stories and commentary by each year's winners of the American Society of Newspaper Editors competition. Although these books deal with all kinds of newspaper writing, they still benefit feature writers. The writing itself is interesting, as are the commentaries by writers describing how they go about their work.

How the Pros Do It

Writing Sample Number 2

The feature story that follows won a Pulitzer Prize, the highest award in journalism. There is no fancy wordplay, no great metaphors, just writing

that sounds as if the writer is talking to a friend. The writer is in control. She breaks conventions by occasionally reading her descriptions to the blind boy who remarks on them. This is not the detached writer. This is a writer who is in the thick of it, who is making things happen.

It is a story about a blind boy with courage, and his family's perseverance to ensure he has a good life. It is not a story about what it is like to be blind or how blindness strikes youth. The writer defined her territory and stuck to it.

It is a deceptively simple story, but at the same time it is an uplifting story.

In his book *Writing for Story*, Jon Franklin, who has won two Pulitzer Prizes, says, "To the eternal chagrin of angry adolescents who yearn to pen indictments against a world they do not yet understand, successful stories generally have happy endings." I'm not sure Franklin is entirely right, but these kinds of stories certainly make the reader feel better. And what Franklin calls "constructive resolutions" do help us better understand the human condition, as does this piece by Alice Steinbach.

A Boy of Unusual Vision

By Alice Steinbach
The (Baltimore) Sun

Opens with description that focuses only on his eyes, which is what the story is about.

Notice the writer uses the story to interact with the subject. The experiment works in this case. Good writers take risks when appropriate.

First, the eyes: They are large and blue, a light, opaque blue, the color of a robin's egg. And if, on a sunny spring day, you look straight into these eyes—eyes that cannot look back at you—the sharp, April light turns them pale, like the thin blue of a high, cloudless sky.

Ten-year-old Calvin Stanley, the owner of these eyes and a boy who has been blind since birth, likes this description and asks to hear it twice. He listens as only he can listen, then: "Orange used to be my favorite color but now it's blue," he announces. Pause. The eyes flutter between the short, thick lashes. "I know there's light blue and there's dark blue, but what does sky blue look like?" he wants to know. And if you watch his face as he listens to your description, you get a sense of a picture being clicked firmly into place behind the pale eyes.

He is a boy who has a lot of pictures stored in his head, retrievable images which have been fashioned for him by

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the people who love him — by family and friends and teachers who have painstakingly and patiently gone about creating a special world for Calvin's inner eye to inhabit.

Picture of a rainbow: "It's a lot of beautiful colors, one next to the other. Shaped like a bow. In the sky. Right across."

Picture of lightning, which frightens Calvin: "My mother says lightning looks like a Christmas tree — the way it blinks on and off across the sky," he says, offering a comforting description that would make a poet proud.

"Child," his mother once told him, "one day I won't be here and I won't be around to pick you up when you fall — nobody will be around all the time to pick you up — so you have to try to be something on your own. You have to learn how to deal with this. And to do that, you have to learn how to think."

There was never a moment when Ethel Stanley said to herself, "My son is blind and this is how I'm going to handle it."

Calvin's mother:

"When Calvin was little, he was so inquisitive. He wanted to see everything, he wanted to touch everything. I had to show him every little thing there is. A spoon, a fork, I let him play with them, just hold them. The pots, the pans. *Everything*. I showed him the sharp edges of the table. 'You cannot touch this; it will hurt you.' And I showed him what would hurt. He still bumped into it anyway, but he knew what he wasn't supposed to do and what he could do. And he knew that nothing in his room — *nothing* — could hurt him.

"And when he started walking and we went out together — I guess he was about 2 — I never said anything to him about what to do. When we got to the curbs, Calvin knew that when I stopped, he should step down and when I stopped again, he should step up. I never said anything, that's just the way we did it. And it became a pattern."

Calvin remembers when he began to realize that something about him was "different": "I just figured it out myself. I think I was about 4. I would pick things up and I couldn't see them. Other people would say they could see things, and I couldn't."

And his mother remembers the day her son asked her why he was blind and other people weren't.

Quote almost works like a summary paragraph, in that it telegraphs what the story is about.

All writing above is done in formal interviews. Parts could even have been done on the phone.

"He must have been about 4 or 5. I explained to him what happened, that he was born that way and that it was nobody's fault and he didn't have to blame himself. He asked, 'Why me?' And I said, 'I don't know why, Calvin. Maybe there's a special plan for you in your life and there's a reason for this. But this is the way you're going to be and you can deal with it.'"

Then she sat her son down and told him this: "You're *seeing*, Calvin. You're just using your hands instead of your eyes. But you're seeing. And, remember, there is *nothing* you can't do."

Notice transition from formal interviewing to showing that there is nothing Calvin can't do. Paragraphs above were telling, paragraphs below are showing. Showing is usually better than telling.

It's spring vacation and Calvin is out in the alley behind his house riding his bike, a serious-looking, black-and-silver two-wheeler. "Stay behind me," he shouts to his friend Kellie Bass, who's furiously pedaling her bike down the one-block stretch of alley where Calvin is allowed to bicycle.

Now: Try to imagine riding a bike without being able to see where you're going. Without even knowing what an "alley" looks like. Try to imagine how you navigate a space that has no visual boundaries, that exists only in your head. And then try to imagine what Calvin is feeling as he pedals his bike in that space, whooping for joy as the air rushes past him on either side.

Writer has taken you outside with Calvin. Notice the details. First details only the sighted can see.

And although Calvin can't see the signs of spring sprouting all around him in the neighboring backyards—the porch furniture and barbecue equipment being brought out of storage, the grass growing emerald green from the April rains, the forsythia exploding yellow over the fences—still, there are signs of another sort which guide him along his route:

Then details Calvin can't see, but uses.

Past the German shepherd who always barks at him, telling Calvin that he's three houses away from his home; then past the purple hyacinths, five gardens away, throwing out their fragrance (later it will be the scent of the lilacs which guide him); past the large diagonal crack which lifts the front wheel of his bike up and then down, telling him he's reached his boundary and should turn back—past all these familiar signs Calvin rides his bike on a warm spring day.

Ethel Stanley: "At 6 one of his cousins got a new bike and Calvin said, 'I want to learn how to ride a two-wheeler

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bike.' So we got him one. His father let him help put it together. You know, whatever Calvin gets he's going to go all over it with those hands and he knows every part of that bike and what it's called. He learned to ride it the first day, but I couldn't watch. His father stayed outside with him."

Calvin: "I just got mad. I got tired of riding a little bike. At first I used to zigzag, go all over. My cousin would hold onto the bike and then let me go. I fell a lot in the beginning. But a lot of people fall when they first start."

There's a baseball game about to start in Calvin's backyard and Mrs. Stanley is pitching to her son. Nine-year-old Kellie, on first base, has taken off her fake fur coat so she can get a little more steam into her game and the other team member, Monet Clark, 6, is catching. It is also Monet's job to alert Calvin, who's at bat, when to swing. "Hit it, Calvin," she yells. "Swing!"

More showing.

He does and the sound of the ball making solid contact with the bat sends Calvin running off to first base, his hands groping in front of his body. His mother walks over to stand next to him at first base and unconsciously her hands go to his head, stroking his hair in a soft, protective movement.

"Remember," the mother had said to her son six years earlier. "There's *nothing* you can't do."

Action sequence ends as it began.

Calvin's father, 37-year-old Calvin Stanley, Jr., a Baltimore city policeman, has taught his son how to ride a bike and how to shift gears in the family's Volkswagen and how to put toys together. They go to the movies together and they tell each other they're handsome.

Now back to formal interviewing.

The father: "You know, there's nothing much I've missed with him. Because he does everything. Except see. He goes swimming out in the pool in the backyard. Some of the other kids are afraid of the water, but he jumps right in, puts his head under. If it were me I wouldn't be as brave as he is. I probably wouldn't go anywhere. If it were me I'd probably stay in this house most of the time. But he's always ready to go, always on the telephone, ready to do something.

"But he gets sad, too. You can just look at him sometimes and tell he's real sad."

The son: "You know what makes me sad? *Charlotte's*

Organization:
This whole section has a theme; it is about sadness, and each ensuing paragraph plays off the one before it.

Web. It's my favorite story. I listen to the record at night. I like Charlotte, the spider. The way she talks. And, you know, she really loved Wilbur, the pig. He was her best friend." Calvin's voice is full of warmth and wonder as he talks about E.B. White's tale of the spider who befriended a pig and later sacrificed herself for him.

"It's a story about friendship. It's telling us how good friends are supposed to be. Like Charlotte and Wilbur," he says, turning away from you suddenly to wipe his eyes. "And when Charlotte dies, it makes me real sad. I always feel like I've lost a friend. That's why I try not to listen to that part. I just move the needle forward."

Something else makes Calvin sad: "I'd like to see what my mother looks like," he says, looking up quickly and swallowing hard. "What does she look like? People tell me she's pretty."

The mother: "One day Calvin wanted me to tell him how I looked. He was about 6. They were doing something in school for Mother's Day and the kids were drawing pictures of their mothers. He wanted to know what I looked like and that upset me because I didn't know how to tell him. I thought, 'How am I going to explain this to him so he will really know what I look like?' So I tried to explain to him about facial features; noses and I just used touch. I took his hand and I tried to explain about skin, let him touch his, and then mine.

"And I think that was the moment when Calvin really *knew* he was blind, because he said, 'I won't ever be able to see your face . . . or Daddy's face,' she says softly, covering her eyes with her hands, but not in time to stop the tears. "That's the only time I've ever let it bother me that much."

But Mrs. Stanley knew what to tell her only child: "I said, 'Calvin, you *can* see my face. You can see it with your hands and by listening to my voice and you can tell more about me that way than somebody who can use his eyes.'"

Provident Hospital, November 15, 1973: That's where Calvin Stanley III was born, and his father remembers it this way: "I saw him in the hospital before my wife did, and I knew immediately something was wrong with his eyes. But I didn't know what."

This section is resolved. And the resolution makes it easy for the reader to move on to the next section. But it is so emotional the reader needs a pause before moving on.

Think of these breaks between sections as seams in cloth, but in this case well-tailored seams.

The mother remembers it this way:

"When I woke up after the cesarean, I had a temperature and couldn't see Calvin except through the window of the nursery. The next day a doctor came around to see me and said that he had cataracts and asked me if I had a pediatrician. From what I knew, cataracts could be removed so I thought, 'Well, he'll be fine.' I wasn't too worried. Then when his pediatrician came and examined him, he told me he thought it was congenital glaucoma."

Only once did Mrs. Stanley give in to despair. "When they knew for certain it was glaucoma and told me that the cure rate was very poor because they so seldom have infants born with glaucoma, I felt awful. I blamed myself. I knew I must have done something wrong when I was pregnant. Then I blamed my husband," she says, looking up from her hands which are folded in her lap, "but I never told him that." Pause. "And he probably blamed me."

"No," says her husband, "I never really blamed her. I blamed myself. I felt it was a payback. That if you do something wrong to somebody else, in some way you get paid back for it. I figured maybe I did something wrong, but I couldn't figure out what I did that was that bad and why Calvin had to pay for it."

Mrs. Stanley remembers that the doctors explained to them that the glaucoma was not because of anything either of them had done before or during the pregnancy and "that 'congenital' simply means 'at birth.'"

They took Calvin to a New York surgeon who specialized in congenital glaucoma. There were seven operations and the doctors held out some hope for some vision, but by age 3 there was no improvement and the Stanleys were told that everything that could be done for Calvin had been done.

"You know, in the back of my mind, I think I always knew he would never see," Mrs. Stanley says, "and that I had to reach out to him in different ways. The toys I bought him were always toys that made a noise, had sound, something that Calvin could enjoy. But it didn't dawn on me until after he was in school that I had been doing that—buying him toys that would stimulate him."

Thirty-three-year-old Ethel Stanley, a handsome, strong-looking woman with a radiant smile, is the oldest

This is another self-contained section; this one gives us historical perspective.

A good interviewer builds trust and people tell secrets they often won't tell, even to those closest to them.

Last paragraph helps make transition to this section which is mostly about Calvin's mother.

of seven children and grew up looking after her younger brothers and sisters while her mother worked. "She was a wonderful mother," Mrs. Stanley recalls. "Yes, she had to work, but when she was there, she was with you every minute and those minutes were worth a whole day. She always had time to listen to you."

Somewhere—perhaps from her own childhood experiences—Mrs. Stanley, who has not worked since Calvin was born, acquired the ability to nurture and teach and poured her mothering love into Calvin. And it shows. He moves in the sighted world with trust and faith and the unshakable confidence of a child whose mother has always been there for him. "If you don't understand something, ask," she tells Calvin again and again, in her open, forthright way. "Just ask."

When it was time to explain to Calvin the sexual differences between boys and girls, this is what Mrs. Stanley said: "When he was about 7 I told him that when you're conceived you have both sexes. It's not decided right away whether you're going to be a boy or a girl. And he couldn't believe it. He said, 'Golly, suppose somebody gets stuck?' I thought, 'Please, just let me get this out of the way first.'

"And I tried to explain to him what a woman's sexual organs look like. I tried to trace it on the table with his fingers. I said, well you know what yours look like, don't you? And I told him what they're called, the medical names. 'Don't use names if you don't know what they mean. Ask. Ask.'"

Back to Calvin.

"When he was little he wanted to be Stevie Wonder," says Calvin's father, laughing. "He started playing the piano and he got pretty good at it. Now he wants to be a computer programmer and design programs for the blind."

Again notice use of details

Calvin's neatly ordered bedroom is outfitted with all the comforts you would find in the room of many 10-year-old, middle-class boys: a television set (black and white, he tells you), an Atari game with a box of cartridges, a braille Monopoly set, records, tapes and programmed talking robots. "I watch wrestling on TV every Saturday," he says. "I wrestle with my friends. It's fun."

Quote reminds us that Calvin's world is different from ours.

He moves around his room confidently and easily. "I know this house like a book." Still, some things are hard for him to remember since, in his case, much of what he remembers has to be imagined visually first. Like the size

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and color of his room. "I think it's kind of big," he says of the small room. "And it's green," he says of the deep rose-colored walls.

And while Calvin doesn't need to turn the light on in his room he does like to have some kind of sound going constantly. *Loud* sound.

"It's 3 o'clock," he says, as the theme music from a TV show blares out into this room.

"Turn that TV down," says his mother, evenly. "You're not *deaf*, you know."

From the beginning, Ethel and Calvin Stanley were determined their blind son would go to public school. "We were living in Baltimore county when it was time for Calvin to start school and they told me I would have to pay a tuition for him to go to public school, and that really upset me," Mrs. Stanley says. "I had words with some of the big honchos out there. I knew they had programs in schools for children with vision problems and I thought public education should be free.

"We decided we would move to Baltimore city if we had to, and I got hold of a woman in the mayor's office. And that woman was the one who opened all the doors for us. She was getting ready to retire but she said she wasn't going to retire until she got this straight for Calvin. I don't know how she did it. But she did."

Now in the fourth grade, Calvin has been attending the Cross Country Elementary School since kindergarten. He is one of six blind students in Baltimore city who are fully mainstreamed which, in this context, means they attend public school with sighted students in a regular classroom. Four of these students are at Cross Country Elementary School. If Calvin stays in public school through the 12th grade, he will be the first blind student to be completely educated within the regular public school system.

Two P.M., Vivan Jackson's class, Room 207.

What Calvin can't see: He can't see the small, pretty girl sitting opposite him, the one who is wearing little rows of red, yellow and blue barrettes shaped like airplanes in her braided hair. He can't see the line of small, green plants growing in yellow pots all along the sunny windowsill. And he can't see Mrs. Jackson in her rose-pink suit and pink enameled earrings shaped like little swans.

Showing rather than just telling us he likes loud sounds around him.

First tells us about getting him into schools, now shows him in school.

