

CHAPTER THREE

Getting the Story Down on Paper

People come into feature writing because they're confident they can write. So, in the beginning at least, most believe they are writers first. If they were just reporters, they would probably work on the news side. But the lesson all these would-be feature writers must learn, and a lesson that is preached over and over again, is that feature writing is nothing without reporting. And what is reporting? It is everything that precedes writing. I have asked the contributors to this section to break the process down in terms of research, interviewing and then organization. Beyond that there is the art of simply hanging around, of being there for the right moment. David Finkel, a writer at the *The Washington Post Magazine*, puts it all together for us, and we see how the best nonfiction writing can't happen without solid reporting.

On Being a Reporter First

David Finkel

One day, long ago, an editor took aside his new feature writer and tried to make a point.

"I just want to tell you, you're some kind of writer," the editor said. "In fact, it's an interesting thing. Whenever there's a hole in one of your stories, you write around it so smoothly that most readers probably aren't even aware a hole is there."

"Thank you," I said, missing the point.

And with that, I was put on the police beat.

"It's time you learned to be a reporter," the editor said. "Some day, you'll thank me."

Well, I don't know about that, but in the dozen or so years since that day, I have learned two general truths about journalism.

One is that writing, for the most part, isn't a lot of fun. Some people may think otherwise, and that's fine. I have met all kinds of people over the years, including those who think it's fun to mock the injured and razz the dead. In such a world, surely there's a place for those who think writing is a good time. Not me. Writing and I have had our moments, but for the most part I'd rather be reporting.

Truth number two: reporting, for the most part, is fun. Tracking down the arcane, interviewing the reluctant, observing the hidden — all of that can be a joy. And a good thing, too, because in the line of work we've chosen, reporting — hard, solid reporting — is at the center of what we do.

Think about the best journalism you have read, and you'll realize this is true. The best stories may seem to turn on wonderful writing, but if you look closely enough you'll discover the true strength of these stories is that every sentence reports some specific piece of information. Maybe it's a fact that gives context. Maybe it's a quote that establishes tone. Maybe it's a description that defines the background.

Whatever it is, it provides some kind of essential detail, and when all the details are added together, the result is a story that takes a reader to a particular time and makes it so real it's as if the reader is his own witness.

The best stories, in other words, are more than a retelling, they're an experience of the senses. A reader doesn't only learn something from a good feature story, he feels it. He sees it, smells it, hears it. He comes to know it down to its most affecting details. He is there.

That's the reader's end.

The writer's end is to regard feature writing as anything but a soft, comfortable undertaking. Put simply, the best stories require a lot of work. There is no formula for producing these stories, but there is a general process to follow that can be broken down into three broad areas: research, interviewing and observation.

In this process, writing is the translation. Reporting is the key.

Research

A colleague of mine, Jack Reed, knows about research.

One time, tracking down a trail of receipts involving a local sheriff, Reed ended up in a small building in North Carolina. "It was a metal shed, like something you'd put your lawnmower in," he says. "It had a metal door and one window that didn't open. It was hot and filled with boxes of gas-purchase receipts for airplanes. It was right off the end of an airport runway, and when jets took off the noise was deafening."

Reed spent a day and a half in that shed sifting through thousands of receipts and never found what he was looking for. A year and a half later, the miseries of those hours were assuaged when he received a Pulitzer Prize for the things he did find. But to this day, the time in the shed remains fresh in his mind. "I'll never forget it," he says. "It was like hell."

The point is, Reed did it because of the potential to make a good story better, and that, at its most basic, is what research is. It's an essential source that can provide you with all kinds of information, from what you don't know to what you haven't thought of. It's a necessity no matter if you are doing an investigative piece like Reed or a simple feature story.

The wonderful part of research is that the paths it can take you down are almost limitless. There are the obvious sources, such as newspaper and magazine clippings, but I've also gotten information from probate files, divorce files, voters' registration records, the Census Bureau, the Weather Service, old high school yearbooks, even the documentary stamps attached to someone's recorded land deeds.

At the least, research provides names, addresses and other starting points for interviews. At best, it provides the kind of authoritative detail that can set a story apart.

Such was the case when I set out to write about a man named Charles Griffith, who was about to go on trial for first-degree murder. This was the lead I wrote:

MIAMI— He was a distraught man that day, a man who sang lullabies and wept. With one hand, he held a gun. With the other, he stroked the smooth face of his daughter, a 3-year-old existing in limbo between life and death.

An hour before, he had given her what he thought was a fatal dose

of Valium. But here she was, still breathing, her tiny chest rising and falling rhythmically, if ever so slightly.

She was in a crib at Miami Children's Hospital, lying on her back. She had been there for eight months, since the day she nearly suffocated. He leaned over the crib railing and looked at her eyes. They were open.

They stared ahead, mirrored no emotions, saw nothing. It was the same for her other senses. The damage to her brain was total and irreversible, and because of it, she couldn't hear his weeping, and she couldn't feel his last touch goodbye before he aimed the gun at her heart.

He shot her twice. He dropped the gun. He prayed that her suffering was over. He fell into a nurse's arms, cried and said he wanted to die. He said, "Maybe I should get the electric chair to make things even. I killed my daughter. I shot her twice. But I'm glad she has gone to heaven."

What makes that lead worth bringing up is that it was built entirely from documents. Griffith, in jail at the time, would only consent to a brief interview. It was the same for the police and attorneys, and none of the witnesses scheduled to testify would talk at all.

Fortunately, there was a fat court file. At first I went through it for basic information, such as names of nurses and other witnesses to call. Then, when it became apparent that none of them wanted to talk to a reporter, I went through the file again, this time concentrating on sworn statements the witnesses had given attorneys in pre-trial proceedings. Those statements, balanced against each other and bolstered by police and hospital reports, provided every detail in my lead as well as the emotional heart of the rest of the story. Documents, nothing more, allowed me to write of the little girl's life:

She would sleep with her eyes open. She couldn't swallow. She was fed through a tube into her stomach. For the first few months, a bolt was inserted into her head to monitor any swelling in her brain. She was kept from further deterioration only through incredible medical wizardry: Nystatin in her mouth to fight off infection. Lacri-Lube in her eyes when they got too dry. Tylenol as a suppository to control her temperature.

And an entire medicine cabinet fed into her through the gastronomy tube: Pedialyte for nourishment, Colace for constipation, Phenobarbital to control seizures, Bactrim to control infection, Valium to relax her muscles, and more.

Also:

He would dab lemon juice on her lips. He would run a cloth under cool water, lay it on her leg and say, "Joy, this is cold." He would put filters over a flashlight, aim it toward her eyes, and say, "Joy, this is red."

He would say, "This is Daddy. If you can hear me, move your toes. If you love me, blink your eyes."

Admittedly, it's a rare case when documents are so complete. In almost any story, though, a few hours of research will at least provide a solid beginning. It will give you background. It will help you focus an idea. If you start the reporting process by building a foundation of information, it will be easier to move on to the next step, which is going out there to meet your story head on.

Interviewing

COCOA—Behold the fat man. Go ahead. Everybody does. He doesn't mind, honestly. That's how he makes his living. Walk right up to him. Stand there and look.

Stand there and stare. Gape at the layers of fat, the astonishing girth, the incredible bulk. Imagine him in a bathtub. Or better yet, on one of those flimsy antique chairs. Boom! If you're lucky, maybe he'll lift his shirt. If you're real lucky, maybe he'll rub his belly.

Don't be shy. Ask him a question.

"What's your name?"

"T.J. Jackson. Better known as Fat Albert."

"How old are you?"

"Forty-three."

"How much do you weigh?"

"Eight hundred and ninety-one pounds."

"Gawd! How many meals you eat a day?"

"Three."

"What—three cows?"

Now there was an easy interview. For three hours, I stood next to Fat Albert and watched his night on the midway unfold. I was prepared to ask him all kinds of questions, but I didn't have to. The people who came by asked every question I had thought of, and more. They asked him how much he weighed, how much he ate, whether he had a girlfriend, whether he had sex, exactly how he

was able to have sex, and on and on. They asked, and I became a stenographer.

If only it was always that easy. It isn't, though, which is why so many writers worry endlessly over interviews. They worry about the order of their questions. They worry about impressing the person they're interviewing. They worry about whether to come across as tough or sympathetic. They worry about what to wear and whether to use a tape recorder.

I know they worry about these things because I worry about them, too.

In truth, though, I know that interviewing isn't a complicated process. Here's what you do: You think of some questions. You start with the easy ones. And then you let things drift where they might until the interview becomes a conversation. Sometimes it happens right away. More often, it takes several attempts. But it does happen.

I interview the main subjects of a piece two, three, four times, usually over a period of days, until I feel I've gotten a true sense of who they are.

I remind myself that I'm not conducting the interview to impress the person I'm writing about, that my obligation is to readers. In this equation, no question is too trivial or inane if it leads to a clearer, stronger piece.

Finally, I remind myself that lots of things are going to go wrong. Maybe everything.

That's what happened when I interviewed a man named Jack Bowman, whose daughter had been murdered by serial killer Theodore Bundy. For 10 years, Bowman never said anything publicly about the case. Then, two hours after Bundy was executed, Bowman consented to an interview.

This was the lead I wrote for a sidebar to my newspaper's main execution piece:

Jack Bowman was up most of the night. At 6 A.M., when it was clear he couldn't fall back asleep, he got out of bed and walked down the hall toward the kitchen. His wife Runelle already had the coffee on. He said good morning to her. He turned on the radio. He turned on the TV, too, keeping the sound low.

At 7 A.M., the news came on, and Bowman watched intently. The pictures were of the scene at Florida State Prison. The prison itself, a long flat shadow, was in the background. In the foreground was a steady stream of cars, and in the cars were people holding signs. One

of the signs read, "Burn Bundy Burn." Another read, "Roast in peace." Another read, "Chi-O, Chi-O, it's off to hell I go."

At 7:18, the phone rang. It was the Florida Attorney General's Office in Tallahassee. "Mr. Bowman, this is Paul Freeman," the caller said. "This is to let you know that the sentence has been carried out. The execution occurred at 7:07, and he was pronounced dead at 7:16."

In St. Petersburg, Jack Bowman hung up. A sensation of relief spread through him. It was a vague feeling—"flat" is a word he would use to describe it later—but relief nonetheless. Theodore Bundy was dead. At last.

What's instructive about the lead is that it came from an interview that went as badly as one can go. Bowman didn't want to talk at his house so he came to the newspaper where I work. The small room I had reserved for the interview couldn't be used after all, so we ended up in the middle of an auditorium. I decided the best way to begin the interview was to ask Bowman about his daughter; as soon as I did, he began to weep. Things disintegrated from there. My questions were awkward. My pacing was awful.

The saving grace is that Bowman, even in grief, was a decent man who allowed me to ask questions endlessly. And I did. I knew I wanted the story to begin with Bundy's death, and when Bowman wouldn't let me be with him during the time of the execution, I knew I would have to ask the kind of trivial-sounding questions that would allow me to put the reader there anyway.

So for a couple of hours, I asked Bowman what time he got up, what time his wife got up, who made the coffee, who turned on the TV, how many steps it was from the bedroom to the living room. I asked everything I could think of until I had enough material to describe a private, pivotal scene as if I had been in attendance.

The interview never did achieve the level of conversation, and yet it was ultimately successful because it did the most important thing of all. It got the details, and the details are what make a story vivid.

In a good story, in other words, the TV isn't just on, its volume is at a certain level.

In a good story, a paranoid schizophrenic doesn't just hear imaginary voices, he hears them say, "Go kill a policeman," and "You can't tell Aretha Franklin how to sing a song."

In a good story, an 11-year-old girl isn't just trapped in the rubble of the Soviet Armenian earthquake . . . "she was afraid to

open her eyes out of fear of what she might see. She heard a noise and grew more afraid until she realized it was the sound of her own breathing. Only then did she conclude she was alive. She opened her eyes, saw nothing, held her breath and listened, heard nothing, tried to move, couldn't."

Observing

The girl in the rubble was named Ani Gabrielian. I met her a few months after the earthquake when she and her father Simon came to the United States for medical help. Shortly after they returned to Armenia, I traveled there to find them. The result was a series of stories that, for me, reinforced the importance of observation in the reporting process.

To anyone who has written a story, the value of observation is obvious. The most compelling stories are often a succession of pivotal moments, and seeing those moments unfold, rather than trying to re-create them, leads to a stronger, richer narrative.

It's obvious—and yet when I go out on stories, I often get so wrapped up in interviews that I forget to step back and become a passive observer. Lately, to overcome that, I've started doing two things.

When I arrive in a strange town, I don't go immediately to my first interview. Instead, I drive around for a while to get a feel for the landscape, the neighborhood, even the street the person I'm interviewing lives on. Doing this helps me settle down after a plane flight, and it also allows me to have a sense of place in mind when I begin asking questions.

I also try to look at any site that will be the focus of a narrative passage as if I were a photographer. I not only stand near something, I move away for a long view, I crouch down, I move left and right. I try to view it from every angle possible to see what might be revealed.

As you might imagine, I do see different things, all of which end up in my notebook. I fill up lots of notebooks on stories because I tend to write down everything I see, even if it's something like, "2 rocks off to left—sedimentary??—resemble poodle."

My hope is that as the reporting process continues, the significance of my notations will emerge. Usually, that doesn't happen; out of a 50-page notebook, I'll have 5 pages of possibly usable quotes, 10 pages of other possibly usable notes, and 35 pages of hieroglyphics.

Sometimes, though, as with Ani and Simon Gabrielian, it does happen.

If ever a story called for observation, it was Armenia after the earthquake of December 7, 1988. More than 25,000 people were killed in the earthquake, including Ani's mother and four of her seven brothers and sisters. Ani's primary injury was physical: She had a leg amputated. Her father Simon's injury was psychological: He was destroyed when he lost most of his family, and then he was destroyed again when, after seeing how well people in America live, he returned to Armenia where he had no place to live but an old railroad boxcar.

He and Ani spent four months in America. While they were here, I visited them frequently, interviewing them about what their lives had been like and what happened to them when the earthquake began. I also read everything I could find about Armenia, and I conducted dozens of interviews with academicians, geologists, architects, search-and-rescue experts, Soviet officials and Armenian-Americans.

Then, Ani and Simon left for Armenia, and I followed a few weeks later. The interviews and research I'd done helped tremendously, providing context for what I observed. But in the end, I used almost none of it because it was the observations themselves that made Ani and Simon's story at all affecting.

One section in particular demonstrates what I mean. It was the ending to the third day of a four-day series, and it described a private moment in Simon's life that came upon his return to a relative's apartment after he visited the graves of his wife and children:

The day is cool. The window is open. Simon sits in the living room, just sits, until his sister-in-law brings him an album of photographs of his children.

He opens the album and looks at the pictures slowly. After a while, his niece, Irina, comes in and begins playing the piano. She plays a piece by Beethoven, a sonata. Simon stops looking at the photographs, closes his eyes and listens.

In any city, in any place, there are the sounds of a day going by. On this day, in this place, the sounds are of some people whose lives are slowly coming to order.

There are footsteps crunching in the gravel.

There is a hushed conversation, too quiet to really hear.

There is a baby crying, and a car door closing.

There is a sonata being played on a piano.

There is a man beginning to cry.

And, soft as a whisper, there is the sound of someone bringing some photographs to his lips, photographs of some children who have died, the quiet sound of a kiss.

I remember the day that story was published. I was awake before dawn. I waited in bed, listening for the sound of the paper being delivered, and when it arrived, I remember reading those nine paragraphs and thinking that, after 12 years of writing newspaper stories, I finally wrote something I liked.

Six months later, those are some of the only paragraphs I've written that I can reread and feel a sense of accomplishment over, and the reasons are twofold.

First, being with Simon that day was one of those privileged moments that make feature stories worth doing. As I sat with Simon, I learned not only about him, but about people in general and about myself. When measured against the devastation of much of a country, the act of Simon kissing some pictures was a little thing to be sure, but it revealed a universal kind of emotion that helped readers see how deep and prolonged someone's grief can be.

Second, I was able to witness that scene because of preparation. I had done enough research about Armenia to have a basic understanding of its history. I had done enough interviews to understand the severity of the earthquake. And I had spent enough time with Ani and Simon for a rapport to develop. I have had people cry before in interviews, and often, as their tears flow, they look at me to see if I have noticed. It wasn't that way at all with Simon. At that moment, he trusted me enough to act as if I wasn't there. I was transparent that day, and he was a grieving man alone. It was the purest of reporting of all.

A Sense of Control

What all of this means is that a good story isn't just a bunch of pretty words. It's a flow of information in which every sentence has something to say. And—as my editor suggested so long ago—it's reporting that allows that to happen.

It's getting to know your subject. It's interviewing for the tiny details. It's watching events unfold.

If you do these things, you'll finish the reporting process in good shape. You'll be able to focus your story. You'll be able to organize your notes. You'll feel like you're in control. You might even feel giddy with success. And then, just when you thought you were having fun, you'll sit down and begin to write.

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Interviewing is an unnatural act. You must sit with notebook and pen in hand, while scribbling notes, perhaps as a tape recorder runs nearby. In the back of your mind you know that accuracy is primary. That means you might have to frame a question several ways until you understand what is being said. At times you will feel a question is embarrassing or dumb, but you must ask it because it is much dumber and more embarrassing to write a story that is incomplete. Fortunately, most people want to talk about themselves. Often they will tell you things they have never said to anyone else. Sometimes an editor will ask you to do a simple interview, let's say with an author passing through town who will give you just an hour on his busy schedule. Then you will want to focus your interview around one theme. It might be as simple as how he came to write his new book. Some magazines have a vitae-like section where you might just have to ask the questions to fit the format. At other times you will be asked to do a full-blown profile, in which case you want to spend as much time with your subject as possible. One interview will probably be less than ideal because you want to dig beneath the veneer to find out what the subject is really made of. No one is better at this digging than Kay Miller of the *Star Tribune* in Minneapolis, who can get people to reveal things they normally would reserve only for close friends.

Interviewing Techniques: Get Them to Talk

Kay Miller

I love interviewing. I love preparing to talk to someone I don't yet know. I love sparring with people who don't expect me to know as

much as I do and emerging with a story they never intended to tell me. I love piecing together bits of information from one person to ask the salient question of another. I love spotting quirks of character.

I even love the odd situations interviews put me in: Crawling through the cold muck of an underground cave. Talking with Jewish dissidents in the Soviet Union. Listening to river people dicker with a traveling pearl buyer. Watching a child be born in the filth of Calcutta. Following a homeless family in their search for a clean, well-lighted place to live.

I love packing my beat-up black purse with notebooks, a handful of pens, and my tape recorder. And I love leaving my office, getting in my car, and driving where no one knows how to reach me.

But most of all I love entering another person's life at the time it is most intense: Birth. Death. Discovery. Magnificent failures. Ignominious successes. In such times, philosopher Joseph Campbell would say human beings feel the rapture of what it is to be alive. We don't pick dull times to write about. So we catch people in the drama and paradox of life. At such times people have wisdom to share. And it seems to me that at such times they are more inclined to tell the truth.

During those times a great interviewer is rather like a great psychologist: In his presence people often reveal far more than intended, while the interviewer listens and watches.

Learn to Listen

Not long ago, my friend Martha Sawyer Allen was permitted onto the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota to cover a religious purification rite. Martha didn't want to blunder into asking offensive questions. So before she left, she asked several Indians' advice on the best way to interview people for her story on native American spirituality.

"Don't take notes. Don't take pictures. And above all, don't ask questions," the Indians advised her. "Just watch. And listen."

Watch. And listen. People will *tell* you what's important, often in ways other than words. Once a psychologist told me that only a small part of communication is words. That means that the majority of what we learn about other people comes through their facial expressions, the tone of their voices, the set of their bodies. Sometimes people say more in the silences between words than through all that

they utter. Sometimes they speak most loudly in their choice of words or the themes to which they repeatedly return.

Of course, over the telephone you will get none of this. From face-to-face interviews, you observe how they have arranged the artifacts of their lives. You watch how they interact—or don't—with their kids, wives, neighbors and friends. Over the hours, you have them reconstruct their life histories, recalling the sights, sounds and color of seminal events.

There are stories that can be done on the fly. But my bias is that to do a thorough job of writing requires multiple interviews in as many settings as makes sense.

I have never encountered a person who told me in the first interview everything about his or her life that was crucial to an understanding of the person. There is a paradox in interviewing people: They crave being known and understood. Yet people hide out emotionally from reporters: Perhaps you will spot in them the very thing that they dislike in themselves.

In first interviews, people select their words carefully. They censor stories they wouldn't want to see in print. Their self-description too often sounds like advertising copy. Perhaps unconsciously, people want to know if you will be repulsed or will exploit them if they reveal their true selves.

I think of a 33-year-old woman who two years before had gotten out of prostitution. She was extremely bright: an honors student in English before she dropped out of college.

At first she talked about prostitution in a detached, clinical way, as if she were a sociologist describing someone else's life. But the more we talked, the harder it was for her to distance herself from her experiences. In an emotionally wrenching third interview, she talked about how loathsome she found sex with strangers. For her to survive, it became imperative that she focus on anything but the intrusion on her body. During sex, she silently recited poetry from her college days. She laughed when she told me that the only poem she could recite in its entirety was "Old Ironsides."

Yet, she said her revulsion was so great that after a time, the poetry was insufficient to block her feelings. So she devised a grisly visualization in which she would mutilate a part of herself. With each sexual encounter, she advanced the image, like installments in a serial:

"I would take a knife. And I would slice around my heart. I would slice off pieces of my heart, and I would watch the blood flow. That sounds kind of psychotic. It worked very well. . . .

"Every time I took another layer off, I would say to myself, 'See? This doesn't hurt. See, this doesn't hurt.' And I did that for a long time. Until the image—my HEART—kept getting smaller and smaller. At some point I didn't have to do it anymore. And I was glad. I was real glad because then I knew I didn't feel anything."

Of course, the more time you spend with people the harder it is to write a one-dimensional story. You begin to see your subjects as human beings, with many traits. I usually approach stories with an underlying hope that the people I've chosen to write about will prove to be admirable characters. They aren't always. And their stories aren't always pretty. Human beings are complex, and the more time you spend with them, the harder it is to write stories that are black and white.

Getting the Interview

Unless you're an investigative reporter with a hidden agenda, it's important to be candid about the focus of your story and what your interviewees can contribute. Let them know how much time the interviews will take and whether they can be done over the phone or should be done in person. On sensitive stories, face-to-face interviews are not only reassuring to the person you're talking with, but they are almost always more productive. And many times an interview isn't simply asking a series of questions and getting a series of answers. Many times it's more, even, than a great conversation. It's putting yourself in the sweep of a person's life, so that you understand the context for all those conversations.

On the other hand, if I'm talking with a relatively minor character—someone who's out of town or somebody who will provide a small slice of background for the story, some historical perspective, another portion about a profilee's background—I use the phone. Generally I do not tape-record these conversations. I'm a very fast typist and take computer notes as they talk. When they're going too fast, I say, "Just a second, could you reiterate that last point?"

When I am contacting someone for an in-depth profile, I let them know that most likely this will take multiple interviews. For a profile of a Minnesota politician I interviewed him six times, with

many more calls in between. Each interview lasted at least two hours; some took as long as four. After that long, my mind turns to mush and paralysis sets into my writing hand.

At the close of an interview, I often tell my subject what has been particularly helpful for my story. Then I schedule our next interview.

Invariably during the interview new questions crop up in my mind. If I don't want to interrupt the flow of conversation, I jot them on the inside cover of my reporter's notebook. Other questions occur as I'm reviewing notes or listening to tapes. These I write down in the front of a notebook, ready for our next interview.

For profiles, I might ask to follow the person through a normal day—or sometimes through a unique day that gives me insights into their work—as I did when I followed pearl buyer Nadine Nelson from her tiny shop in Stockholm, Wisconsin, to watch her negotiate for rare pearls found in Mississippi River clams.

Unpredictably, the greatest insights I had about Nelson came during our three-hour drive home in the dark, where conversation was more relaxed than it had been before. I stopped taking notes and simply listened to stories from her life. She told me about growing up rich in Morocco and later living a hand-to-mouth existence with her artist husband. She told me about dirty tricks played on her by some competitors. Good quotes from that drive were lost. But everything else I knew about Nadine Nelson made more sense.

Stay Away From Restaurants

By far the worst places to conduct interviews are restaurants. They are noisy and distracting. If you've ordered something delicious, you're too preoccupied to eat it. Invariably your subject tells you something compelling just as you've picked up a sloppy sandwich and you look like a fool scrambling for a pen.

There are, of course, exceptions that prove the rule. My colleague Bob Ehlert did a stunning profile of playwright August Wilson drawn from interviews conducted in a restaurant where Wilson did much of his writing. The point is to select locations for interviews that will tell you more about the person you're interviewing: If you're profiling a prosecutor, get him in court. If it's a pearl buyer on the river, get her with river people. If it's a clothes buyer, follow her to showrooms.

If you're doing a series of interviews, it makes sense to let your subject choose where he or she will be most comfortable for the first interview — and you do the moving.

If your story also relies on photographs, think about whether the sites you select will provide action shots or boring, static pictures. My original interviews with a doctor who had been exposed to the AIDS virus were in a hospital office and later in his home — neither of which would have produced compelling photographs. Photographer David Brewster joined me in the emergency room with the doctor and got some very dramatic photos.

Preparation

The kind of interview you plan to do will shape your preparation. If you're planning a profile, you'll want to read everything possible about the person. Usually I mentally store away interesting anecdotes, crisis points, controversies, points of heroism or shame that I'd like expanded upon.

If the interview is going to be tense, or time is strictly limited, I prepare a set of questions that follow a logical progression from least threatening to most difficult. My hope is that by the time we reach the tough questions, both the person I'm interviewing and I will be relaxed enough so that I can ask almost anything — and have it be answered. The point is to know — going in — what kind of material you want coming out of the interview. If the interviewee raises a relevant subject, it can be the perfect foil for raising the tough questions.

Once I've grown conversant with a topic, I rarely need prepared questions. I know what gaps I need that person to fill in for me.

Just a word about dress: Whenever possible, I dress according to the expectations of the people I'm interviewing. In 1982, I went to a conference of American Catholic Bishops in Washington, D.C. The first day, my interviews went very smoothly. My notebook was loaded with good material. But the second day, the bishops seemed more standoffish. I sensed a reluctance that hadn't been there the day before. Though I was puzzled, I didn't give it much more thought.

I left the conference directly for the airport. On the plane trip home, I fell into a conversation with a businessman who owned a small but thriving computer company. Tending to the details was

the secret of his success, the man said, and that included such items as requiring all his female salespeople to wear business suits with skirts, not pants.

Bristling at the notion of women working under what constituted a dress code, I pointed to the maroon silk pantsuit I'd been wearing on the final day of the bishops' conference. It made no difference to my interviews whether I wore these slacks or the dress I had on the previous day, I said.

"That may be," the man said skeptically. "But if you came to interview me dressed like that, I would make you work twice as hard for the interview."

Timing

Deciding who to interview and when can be crucial to the success of an interview and your entire story. After a national discussion on banning assault weapons, my editor and I decided I should follow the life of a single gun. I wanted a case that was about two years old, one that already had been adjudicated so I'd have a court record to rely on. I settled on the case of one Browning 9mm Hi-Power semiautomatic. I chose it after a prosecutor recalled that one of the central characters referred to the murder weapon as "my favorite toy."

On this story, I began by interviewing more peripheral characters—police, prosecutors, weapons manufacturers, officers at the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. This I did for tactical reasons: First, I knew that they had no stake in the case and therefore it would cost them nothing to help me. Others might have dozens of reasons not to be interviewed. Second, I am characteristically tongue-tied on unfamiliar topics; I stumble looking for the right terminology. By starting at the outer ring of characters, I learned the language of weapons, as I gathered useful data and gained a foothold on the story. Then I was ready to interview people in the center of the drama.

From police records I got the name of Stephen Petersen, the accountant and sometime-firearms dealer from whom the guns had been stolen. Originally I had no idea how important Petersen would be in the story, so our first interview was over the telephone. As it turned out, Petersen had become obsessed with the theft, spending all his spare time for two years seeking prosecution of the men in-

volved in the theft and sale of his guns. However, when the Browning Hi-Power turned up in the hands of a murderer, the police decided not to tell him:

Not until Petersen was contacted by a reporter did he know that his 9mm Browning had found its way into the hands of an armed robber. Worst of all was the news that the weapon he bought to protect his family was used to murder a man.

"My gun killed a man?" All the bravado in Petersen's voice seeps away. At first Petersen sounds as if he does not want to believe this. Then there is no sound from him at all.

Quietly he tries to make conversation again: "My worst fear's come true.

"Now, I'm not responsible for that man's death. I feel a moral responsibility. But the bottom line is that it could just as well have been another weapon. From that standpoint, if it wasn't mine, it would have been someone else's."

In a flash Petersen switches from morose tones to angry ones in which he talks about the need for longer prison sentences and capital punishment. Then he shifts back to the morose tone again.

"You see what happened? My efforts failed. We *knew* who burglarized the house and failed to put them away. A killing took place 10 months later. We failed. I failed because I didn't get the job done. I wanted those guns swept off the street."

Earlier, I talked about starting at the outer ring of characters on a complex story. Waiting to interview principal characters can, however, be risky.

Doing a story on an internecine family feud over an elderly mother's care, I made the tactical error of contacting the family's minister before letting all her adult children know I was doing the story. Within a day, the woman's favorite grandson called me, sputtering with rage, saying that the minister had told him some reporter was snooping around. Not only was this well before I was prepared to talk with the grandson, but he was so angry he refused to participate in the story. And he poisoned the well for me with his mother, aunts and uncles also.

Moral of the story: It's important not to wait too long to contact a principal person in a story, lest the person think you've got sinister intent and resolve not to work with you.

An Ideal Example

For me the structure of my first and subsequent interviews with Mark Dayton, a politician and member of the Dayton-Hudson department store family, comprised a textbook case on how I conduct interviews.

Our first of six interviews was at Dayton's home. He met me at the door, his posture ramrod straight. He was extremely cordial. Yet, even when Dayton smiled, he looked sad. His face seemed drawn down hard around the prominent bones of an aristocratic face. He led me into his living room and left to get coffee and mineral water. I picked a chair at right angles to a sofa. That way I could comfortably look him in the eye, without having to turn my body. There was a coffee table on which to set my tape recorder.

When Dayton returned, we made small talk briefly. Then we agreed to ground rules for the interview.

"Where's a good place for us to begin?" I asked.

Dayton began a detailed, fairly dry monologue that followed a strict chronology from the time he was last in the public eye to present day. From experience, I knew this first interview would lay the foundation for our subsequent meetings. I simply let it take its own course, seldom interrupting. I told Dayton that it is my style to try to put the reader in important scenes and that it would help me if he would describe settings, people, feelings, with as much detail as possible. Those are the elements of story telling. Some people are storytellers and some are not. Dayton was not.

From his word choices, the looks on his face, the falters, I would have to figure out which were the salient scenes to describe and return to for details later. Despite Dayton's clear willingness to please, the entire interview felt oddly stiff and contrived.

Every time I stepped into a tender area, asked a highly personal question, Dayton sidestepped it or declared it off limits:

Were there times in alcoholism treatment that stick out in your mind as particularly powerful?

"It was all powerful. . . ."

What factors contributed to the breakup of your marriage?

"I don't feel it's appropriate to get into. . . ."

Do you remember times in your childhood when growing up that were especially painful?

"I'm not going to get into that here. . . ."

Tell me about the new relationship you had that stopped last spring?

"I'm not going to say anything about that, except for the power of the experience. . . ."

Walls kept going up. I was frustrated.

Impressions

After returning to the office from an important interview, I try to record impressions, as I did for this story: "Has a need to be socially correct . . . So prissy he starts off one slightly off-color story saying, 'This is off the record' . . . Walls go up . . . Clearly knows what he will talk about, what he won't. You'll be getting someplace, then the walls go up . . . Everything about Dayton is controlled, everything planned."

Later my impressions of Dayton changed dramatically as I began to see the depth of his character, warmth and humor. But these notes gave me a reference point.

Dayton had set our first interview in the living room of his home. While comfortable, it is also formal, with implied boundaries. So when he offered to get me coffee during our second interview, I traipsed out to the kitchen behind him, settling myself on a high stool around an island counter, talking while he poured.

That began a modest ritual: Before each interview, we'd talk for half an hour or so about our lives, kids, articles we'd read, other politicians, sports, whatever came to mind. Sometimes Dayton would catch himself saying something unguarded: "Are we off the record?" he'd ask. To which I'd reply, "We are now, but I may want to ask you about it later."

These informal conversations gave Dayton a chance to know me better. It's a scary thing to open yourself up to a reporter. And I believe these talks gave Dayton reason to believe that I wouldn't abuse his trust. Perhaps in stepping over the initial boundary, I unconsciously had broken down some of the psychic distance that Dayton had set up.

Soon he would talk about his family and about how his divorce devastated him. As Dayton described those feelings, both he and I cried. Particularly wrenching was telling his older son that Daddy was moving to another house:

"Just the look of horror on his face. . . ." Dayton's eyes are closed again, and he looks slightly ill. "Even when I think about it now, it's just very moving. I mean he was so small and so innocent and vulnerable. And his world was about to be changed drastically."

Several days later the boy was to spend the night at Dayton's townhouse for the first time. Sensing that it might be rough, Dayton tried to smooth the transition by letting him pick out his own bed, desk and dresser.

That night Dayton read his child a book and put him to bed. Like always.

"I think I'd rather sleep in your bed," his son said. So they trucked down the hall to Dayton's room.

"I tucked him in my bed, and I lay down beside him. After just a couple minutes he said he thought he'd rather go back and sleep in his bed at his house. As I drove him back to our house I didn't blame him. I would've rather been back there too.

"I remember coming back here after that point, just breaking down into tears — the awfulness of the reality of that just driving itself in."

Using a Tape Recorder

I always tape-record important interviews. Invariably there is rich material in my tape recorder that never made it into my notebook. In the five years since I left news side to write for the *Minneapolis Star Tribune's* Sunday magazine, one of the most satisfying feelings is the sense that I am not leaving great material out of stories.

Moreover, people speak in voices that are distinctive to them — their idiom — and the ear is not always quick enough to pick these up. Tapes capture the power and subtlety of human exchange in a way I have found impossible with handwritten notes. In my 14 years of reporting I have yet to meet a reporter whose hearing is so keen and whose hand so quick that he or she can catch every word accurately in sentences to be quoted later. That includes me. Sometimes I'm appalled at the lapses in my own notes.

I use a small tape recorder that fits into my purse with a reporter's notebook. On the slow setting, one tape will record two hours' worth of conversation. I generally keep an extra box of micro-cassettes and a handful of batteries at the bottom of a large, embarrassingly cluttered purse.

Before I turn the recorder on, I make sure that's all right with the person I'm interviewing. "It's a way to keep me honest," I might

quip. "That way I'm not going to quote you saying something you never did."

Not only does that give them some assurance, but when people know you are taping, they are less inclined to later accuse you of inaccuracy or taking things out of context. That may well be, because you're less likely to commit those journalistic sins.

A small tape recorder rapidly becomes unobtrusive in a way that note-taking never is. Taping also frees me to jot down descriptions—of the person, his surroundings, his demeanor—without missing chunks of the discussion. Sometimes I get so excited when people expound on an important idea or are at last telling me the true grit of their emotion, that my hand freezes up. I miss things I know I'll need.

Moreover, as I listen to tapes, I feel as if I'm back in Mark Dayton's living room, sensing his human frailties and strengths. Carrying that feeling into writing brings some unquantifiable, intangible bonus.

All those are taping's rewards. But it carries a steep price: the time involved in transcribing tapes. To limit that amount of time I spend transcribing, I circle material in my notes that I want to retrieve from the tape. Next to quotes that were great, but I couldn't write fast enough to capture entirely, I typically write "get." Or I circle or star seminal ideas. Nevertheless, there's a tremendous temptation to listen to whole tapes and transcribe far more than can ever be incorporated into a piece.

The other downside of taping—and this is far worse—is that machines and tapes and batteries can fail. So can the operator: I've unwittingly taped an interview with explorer Will Steeger right over a key talk with St. Paul school's superintendent William Bennett. I've left the pause button on in an interview with a Canadian woman who helped Vietnam draft dodgers settle in Toronto. I've had a tape-recorder refuse to run during a conversation with AIDS physician Dr. Frank Rhame. It is daunting to think you've got a terrific interview socked away, only to discover that the tape is blank.

Your only salvation is taking good notes so that you don't come up empty.

It's Just Conversation

In many respects interviewing is just conversation with someone you want to know. Think about how you are with a stranger you find

intriguing and want to know more about. You face the person, eyes trying to make contact. You tell him or her a little about yourself searching for common ground. With your expression and the power of your entire being you say, "There is nothing at this moment more important than what you are saying to me."

In a society where people are so prone to interrupt each other and to discount others with the disdain of disinterest, there is nothing so satisfying as someone who listens, really listens to you.

Another way to make an interview more of a conversation is to make it two-way. Often I find myself talking about my children and the things I have learned from them—or the trying times. This is done without guile or premeditation. It's simply the way I am in conversation. Yet I understand that it makes me less threatening. If interview subjects are sometimes appalled at the things they have told me, there are times that I am incredulous at those intimate details I have shared with them about my life.

You also have to be tough enough in interviews to ask questions that will cause discomfort. My style in asking such questions varies. Most often I ask tough questions straight on, without flinching.

Yet I was sufficiently intimidated by the process of asking one prominent interviewee if she really spit on her best friend in a rage, that I backed into the question:

"I've been dreading asking you about this, but a number of people have mentioned it. . . ." I started. My tone was so timid and apologetic that *she* burst out laughing.

"Oh the spitting incident. . . ." She claimed that among her group of friends, spitting on one another had become a silly, idiosyncratic joke.

Sidestepped Questions

Many times I ask questions that people really don't want to answer, no matter how gingerly they're asked. When I don't get an answer that's satisfying or smacks of truth, I return to it.

Sometimes I laugh to hear on my tapes how many different ways I've asked the same thing and how many times I have persistently returned to an unanswered question someone has sidestepped, as Dayton did when I asked him how much he was drinking in the depths of his alcoholism. The first time he ducked the question, answering one I'd never asked. So I asked again. He paused for

a long time. "I drank enough that it was a problem," was the closest he came to answering.

If a question is particularly important and the person continues to avoid answering it, I sometimes say pointedly, "I know I've asked this before, but I don't feel that I have a satisfying answer yet. . . ." Alternatively, I might comment that this area seems to be one that he or she is avoiding and ask if there's a reason.

Which takes us to another point: Pay attention to your instincts. If you sense a certain reaction to a particular question, chances are it is an area you should delve into. If someone laughs at an odd time or if his or her eyes mist over unexpectedly, there's more there.

When It's Over

Generally I assume that everything people say is on the record and open for me to quote, unless they specify otherwise in advance.

If they ask to see the article before it's published, I explain that I never do that, but that I routinely review my stories and will likely get back to them to double-check details. If they feel there's a point that I've missed, we should go over that now, I'll say. And they may call me back to make sure I really understood points they made.

I consider double-checking an important part of interviewing, and I tell people to expect me to call back as I get close to completion of the story. Before I call them, I go through each line of the story and jot numbered questions on every item that I am not absolutely sure of.

On the story about Dayton, there were 50 items—some large, some small—to check. Even in thorough interviews, I have left some gaping holes or made egregious assumptions. Double-checking is the only way to get it right.

Toward the end of every interview I ask a variation of the same question: "Is there anything else I should be asking about?"

People are often startled and generally gratified for this question to be asked. To them it signals that I understand my own limitations and biases, that I am open to new lines of thinking. I also ask if there are other people who would be worth talking to.

Even material that never gets into the stories can be important. During one of my kitchen chats with Mark Dayton, I mentioned that I always sing to my daughters at night. I asked whether he and his boys sang together. No, he answered. Of course, his sons sang songs

from school. He loved listening to them, but he never joined in. He'd never sung as a child.

Later, Dayton and I were sitting in the darkened balcony of Westminster Presbyterian Church, where Dayton went during his darkest times to pray and sort things out. Our talk was random and about nothing very important. He mentioned a song from the seventies that I couldn't place.

"How does that go?" I asked.

At that, Dayton sang in a voice deep and melodic. Gone was any self-consciousness. For the first time in six interviews, I felt that the walls had come down. I felt I had glimpsed the real Mark Dayton. And I liked him a great deal.

I kept looking for a way to work the singing in, but it didn't fit. As it happened, I ended the Dayton story with a scene of him in the balcony. But that was the story of his epiphany, not of his song:

During the times that Dayton felt most humbled, during the darkest night, he spent a good deal of time in the sanctuary of Westminster Church. Three, sometimes four times a week, he'd climb to the balcony to find God, if there was God.

There, he could be quiet and look for light coming through the darkness. Once silence was his enemy, a reminder of his isolation and profound alienation from himself. As Dayton came to be at peace with himself, he sought the silence and called it solitude. . . .

Kay Miller is a Sunday magazine staff writer at the *Star Tribune* in Minneapolis and has worked at the newspaper since 1978. She has concentrated on human interest stories, which have taken her to such places as India and the Soviet Union and have won her numerous writing awards, including first place in general excellence in the American Association of Sunday and Feature Editors' "Excellence in Feature Writing Competition" in 1989. She has a master's in print journalism from American University in Washington, D.C.

Research is essential for every feature writer. A freelancer who doesn't begin with research is generally doomed to failure. Even the initial idea has to be tested via research to ensure it hasn't already been done by the publication you are writing for. Selling the idea to an editor has to be more than just an idea off the top of your head. It has to be grounded in facts and details that come from research. This can mean reviewing previous magazine and newspaper stories, looking up data, digging out names of sources. It is a lot of work. However, this is a golden age for freelancers working at home who need to do research. A

writer with a computer and a modem can tap into all the research databases currently available, plus all the traditional sources such as the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* and the *New York Times Index* at the library. Indeed, you'll see the traditional print sources worked fine for Mike D'Orso in this next piece.

Researching Your Feature Stories

Mike D'Orso

A few years ago, the writer John McPhee said to the editor of an anthology titled *The Literary Journalists*:

"... you've got to understand a lot to write even a little bit. One thing leads to another. You've got to get into it in order to fit the pieces together."

Getting into it, for McPhee, means spending months, even years, immersing himself in his subject, whether it is the orange industry in Florida or volcanoes in Iceland. Few journalists have the luxuries of time and space to study and shape the sorts of stories McPhee writes. The pieces he fits together become books, while the rest of us rarely end up with more than a couple of pages in the Sunday paper.

But that's enough to have a goal as high as McPhee's: to want our writing to touch the reader, to draw him in, to keep him there until we're finished, and to leave him with something he did not feel, know or fully understand before. We want our readers to trust and believe us, to hear the voice of authority in our words. We are storytellers, but our stories are grounded in fact. And so, like McPhee, we must begin in the same place:

With research.

Know Where to Dig

As writers in the realm of reality, we are only as good as our material. But rarely is that material lying right before our eyes. More often than not, we have to mine it. To do that, to know where to dig and how, takes preparation. And that is what research is — simple, solid preparation.

What do I need to know? Who do I need to ask? With research, these questions begin to be answered, the story starts to take shape, the targets become focused, and we can approach them armed with the ammunition of at least a little knowledge.

Without research, we are shooting in the dark.

Not long ago I got the idea to write a piece about hearses. More specifically, it was about people who own and drive *used* hearses. I had noticed a few around town and decided to track down the drivers, to find out who in the world would turn a funeral coach into the family car.

First I walked upstairs to our newspaper library back-story file, fearing the off chance that this story might have been written before. It wasn't. There are times, of course, when I go to our library *hoping* to find something. Sometimes I'm not even sure what it will be, as in the case of the 25th anniversary of John F. Kennedy's assassination.

Here was a story that had been approached in every imaginable way over the quarter century. My task was to imagine a new one. When I began scanning the microfilm of our newspapers from the weeks before and after November 22, 1963, I had no idea exactly what I was after — until I found it, on an obituary page printed a few days after Kennedy's death.

A seven-year-old boy named David White had died Friday, November 22, at 2 P.M., the same day and time as Kennedy. I pulled the phone book and checked his parents' name at the address given in the obituary. They still lived there, after all these years. No one had ever talked to them about the timing of their son's death. When I called, they were stunned. But they were also ready to talk — to me and to each other — about feelings they had never fully faced.

No reporter had ever talked to June and Gerald Winters either. But after I called several local hospitals and had them each search their birth records for November 22, 1963, I discovered June Winters had given birth to a boy the same afternoon Kennedy was shot — a boy she named John.

Finally, I followed up on a headline I had noticed in the November 23 sports section. There had been one local high school football game that was not canceled the night of Kennedy's death. A fullback had scored six touchdowns in that game, setting a state record that still stands. He was not listed in the phone book, but when I called the athletic department at his old high school, they led me to Frankie

Culpepper. He was living with his mother, who still pulls out scrapbooks of his fullback days.

I had my story.

It was Friday afternoon, the day Alice White normally headed home from the hospital after her husband Earl replaced her at her little boy's bedside.

But this Friday was different. The couple's 7-year-old son David, who had been battling a kidney disease for a year, had suddenly taken a turn for the worse. He was lying in an intensive care ward, surrounded by doctors scrambling to save his life. Earl was on the highway, rushing from his Virginia Beach job to the hospital in Richmond. As Alice sat in a waiting room wondering if her son would survive, a cluster of nurses stood around her in tears.

"They were all crying," recalls Alice White.

"Crying," she says, "for Kennedy."

That is how the first of the three profiles began, portraits of people whose private tragedy and triumph had become linked to and shadowed by the public pain of a president's death. I would never have found their stories if not for some old microfilm, some accurate hospital files, and a reporter's best friend, the telephone.

Try the Library

The telephone eventually helped me with the hearses, but before making some calls I went to another library—the one at the local university. The *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* and the *Newspaper Index* are there. They contain listings of major magazine and newspaper stories, respectively, indexed by subject. The *Newspaper Index* goes back only a few years. The *Reader's Guide* goes back beyond the turn of the century, and I have occasionally gone back that far with it, nibbling at anything I could find on subjects ranging from bowling to hoboes.

You've got to have a tenacity bordering on obsession to stay with a search like this, but sometimes the payoffs are delicious. To prepare for an interview with Mary Travers of Peter, Paul, & Mary, I found dozens of magazine stories written since the sixties. Skimming those helped give me a frame of reference, but it was Travers' appearance as a teen food editor in a 1953 issue of *Seventeen* magazine that gave me an offbeat icebreaker I used in our interview. When I

mentioned her recipe for pineapple-braised pork chops, Travers nearly choked. She loved being thrown for a loop like that. Celebrities can be tough nuts to crack, but we can usually find a way if we do our homework.

Sometimes that homework uncovers something that totally transforms the story we thought we were doing. I recently found a former sumo wrestler who had arrived in town to train at a local gymnasium. The Japanese wrestler didn't speak a word of English, but his American coach told me all about the plans to turn him into an Oriental Hulk Hogan. What I wasn't told was that this sumo had been tossed from his sport back in Japan after he hit the 88-year-old chief of his sponsor's group in a fit of temper. I learned about that in a *New York Times* report I dug up as I was searching the *Newspaper Index* for anything on the sport of sumo. My story on this stranger in a strange land had now become more than merely odd—it had the tint of tragedy.

Occasionally it is worth looking beyond a library's reference room to check out what's in the general catalogs. (Yes, sometimes even reporters can take time to look at a book.) If not for a 1937 tome titled *Llamas and Llamaland*, I would never have known that the Incas used to decapitate and sacrifice these animals before feasting on their flesh. I had found that information before going to roam the grounds of the International Llama Convention a couple of summers back. It came in handy as I prodded these people about their peculiar pets. The mention of barbecued llama got me enough quotes to fill a couple of notebooks. I even found room for the Inca anecdote in my story.

If I hadn't looked at a few books about Dick Gregory before meeting his daughter at a local college, the story on her arrival in town would have gone nowhere:

It was not until she was in college that the young black woman heard comedian/activist Dick Gregory speak. "I never knew he was so funny," she said. "I was in tears."

She never read *Nigger*, Gregory's 1964 autobiography, until a friend gave it to her three years ago. "It was tragic. I was crying," she said. "I didn't know anything about his childhood."

She was surprised when a reporter mentioned that Gregory was wounded during the 1965 rioting in Watts. "You mean shot?" she asked. "Like, with a bullet?"

She was confused when a photographer told her he had photo-

graphed Gregory in Selma the same year. "What went on down there?" she asked.

"Marching and stuff?"

She admits it is odd that a black third-year college student majoring in mass media and enrolled in a course in Afro-American history knows nothing about Selma. Even stranger, she admits, is how little she knows about Dick Gregory.

He is, after all, her father.

There was a void in Pam Gregory. But the details I had gathered beforehand gave the void a context. And *that* became the story.

Make Your Own Good Luck

Unfortunately, all I found on hearses at the library were an article in a magazine called *Canadian Business* about that nation's most successful hearse manufacturer, a slim piece on horse-drawn hearses in *Americana Magazine*, and a *People* magazine feature about a California couple who rent hearses and caskets. No books. No luck.

There are ways to make your own luck. One is to keep your eyes—and your mind—open all the time. Some of the stuff you stumble across while researching one story can lead to another. I recently wrote a piece on a group called the Vietnam Veterans Motorcycle Club. While researching the biker culture, I looked at several magazines with titles like *Outlaw Biker* and *Iron Horse*. Inside those magazines I noticed a few ads for products aimed specifically at Vietnam vets. A few months after I finished the biker story, I went back to those magazines and picked up a few more, new publications with titles like *Vietnam* and *Vietnam Combat*. The trend I had sniffed in those biker ads was all over the pages of these war magazines. I began clipping ads, dozens of them, then called each of the companies that had placed them. Finally I tracked down some veterans, including Jan Scruggs, the man behind the building of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall. My story, titled "Milking Vietnam," began like this:

War is hell, but it sure can sell.

Just ask the Battlefield Replica Company of Magnolia, Ark., which will ship you an M1911 Automatic pistol—"the gun that blazed away in Khe Sanh, Khan Duc and Hue"—for \$9.95. Order now and receive a "Vietnam Death Card Patch, the card often seen decorating helmets of Vietnam jungle fighters."

Or call the Pieces of History company in Wildomar, Calif. They've got something called the Republic of Vietnam Air Force Northern Expeditionary Medal, which, says the company, "was authorized by decree of Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van Thieu but was never awarded for unknown reasons."

For \$40 (plus \$2 postage and handling), the medal is yours.

If your tastes run toward collectible ceramics, Nilsson's Fine Porcelain of Solvang, Calif., has just the thing: "Dust-Off," first in a series of four "collector's plates honoring the Vietnam Veteran."

Rimmed in 24-carat gold, each saucer is decorated with a drawing of Marines clearing a helicopter landing zone in the Vietnamese jungle.

Price: \$29.50 a piece.

And it ended like this:

"It makes me ill," says Murphy. "I think it's disgusting, a rip-off. All most of these companies are in this for is the money. They couldn't care less about the Vietnam vet, about the pain that was suffered, the damage that was done. They're simply using the current awareness and interest in Vietnam as a marketing tool."

Even the Vietnam vets who are making money off the war bother Murphy.

"Look," he says, "your service to your country is just that. It doesn't give you any special license to come back and sell something based on that."

But David Grieger disagrees.

"It's the American way," says Grieger. "And if you don't like this kind of thing, don't buy it. These are some of the freedoms those 60,000 or so names on the wall up there in Washington died for."

Noticing those magazine ads made that story. They were the root of my research. The rest was follow-through.

The hearse piece, however, did not fall in place so quickly. After I left the library, I went back to the office and began dialing local funeral homes. None of them sold used hearses. None of them knew any owners of used hearses. But I did learn a little bit about how they buy hearses, and I discovered that most funeral homes sell their old hearses back to the manufacturer. That led me to the largest hearse maker in the nation, the Superior Coach Company in Ohio. I called Superior's vice president for sales and got more information than I could ever want on the hearse industry. My talk with him and with several other companies gave me an idea of how many of these

vehicles were entering the market each year and at what prices. Although I still had nothing on used hearses, I was circling the subject, beginning to zero in.

The Encyclopedia of Associations

Some of the best background information on any story having to do with an industry or a business comes straight from the companies themselves. And almost every industry, or organization, or interest of any type has at least one association representing it. Most of those associations are listed in one of the most valuable—and fascinating—reference books a feature writer can find: the *Encyclopedia of Associations*. Its two volumes, updated each year, contain more than 2,000 pages listing almost 22,000 organizations representing almost every conceivable subject. Addresses, phone numbers and brief synopses are included on groups ranging from Puzzle Buffs International (39,000 members, headquartered in Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio) to the Flying Dentists Association (500 members, based in Dunwoody, Georgia) to the Maine Sardine Council (7 members, located in Brewer, Maine).

The only hearse club listed in the encyclopedia's index was the Hearse and Car Owners Association ("address unknown since 1970"; no other information available). But the Superior Cadillac salesman mentioned a group called the Professional Car Society and gave me the home number of its president in Ohio. I talked with her a bit—her husband owns a seven-passenger Packard hearse—and she gave me the Dayton number of her club's expert on funeral wagons.

He was a gold mine. Not only did he know everything there was about the history of hearses, not only did he tell me where I could find a copy of *American Funeral Cars and Ambulances Since 1900* (the author sold the book out of his Florida home), not only has he owned a half dozen used hearses in his lifetime and was full of stories about the ins and outs of bartering for the relics, but he had in his Rolodex the name and number of the only used hearse dealer in the nation.

Now I was getting somewhere. Besides picking up information along the way, I was beginning to collect characters who would become part of my story. The used hearse dealer, in Cincinnati, described his strange range of customers across the country, from a softball team that travels to tournaments by hearse to a restaurant owner who uses his to deliver pizzas. The dealer estimated there were

2,000 used hearses on the road for purposes other than hauling dead bodies. And one of his best customers, he told me, lived one town away from our newsroom.

Bingo. The trail of research had now come full circle, landing me in my own backyard with a lead on the first of several local hearse owners who would become part of my story. It had taken two days of roaming the library and sitting on the phone, but the digging was worth it. And I knew when I had enough. It is easy for writers to be seduced by research, to become what *Wall Street Journal* editor William E. Blundell calls "scholastics":

... who, against all reason, try to learn everything about a subject before writing anything. Lacking a sense of scope, they report and report until their desks are hidden under stacks of papers and notes. They become prisoners of their stories.

We can't learn everything about our subjects. We can, as McPhee says, "understand a lot." It is up to a writer to decide how much that is, and to know when his material is threatening to control him rather than vice versa. Remember, too, that much of that material will never find its way into the story. A mistake young writers often make is trying to cram everything they know into the text. What they have to remember is that their readers—and their editors—don't care about all the behind-the-scenes sweat they shed scouring courthouse records, locating government reports, filing Freedom of Information requests. All that matters is the story. Most of my hearse material was left in my notes, but it all guided my voice as I began to write that story:

Ask Phil Rubino about his hearse. Everyone else does.

They lean out at traffic lights to see what he's got in the back. They snap his picture as he passes them on the interstate, his STIFF license plates disappearing in the distance. His neighbors would probably like to know how much longer he plans to park that shiny chocolate brown '76 end-loading Superior Cadillac out by the curb as if it's just any other family car—which it is for Rubino and his wife and daughter.

After all, it is a Caddy. Which means it's got cruise control, power windows, power seats, double-air, and it fits eight with enough comfort to make you forget it was built to carry corpses.

Some people will never get used to seeing a hearse anywhere but at graveside. Never mind that used funeral coaches have been showing up in strange hands for years.

There was a wave of hearses among rock bands in the late 1960s.

Chimney sweeps have used them for decades—you can shove a lot of ladder into a 25-foot-long limo. Grateful Dead fans have been following their heroes in hearses for 20 years. And there have been recent sightings of hearses in Virginia Beach, where surfers seem to have found the perfect car for storing their boards and throwing a party—as well as raising eyebrows.

“The average person meets a hearse owner and automatically assumes he’s meeting a ghoul,” says Bernie DeWinter. “That’s just not true.”

DeWinter should know. He is the historian of the 600-member Professional Car Society, a national organization of hearse, ambulance and limousine owners headquartered in Ohio. A 38-year-old tool grinder by day, DeWinter’s hobby has been hearses since he was a little boy sketching the ambulances and funeral coaches that paraded past his Dayton classroom window.

“The school was right on the route to the hospital and the cemetery,” he explains.

Research. No writer should be caught dead without it.

Mike D’Orso is a feature writer for *The Virginian-Pilot* and *The Ledger-Star* newspapers in Norfolk, Virginia. His work has also appeared in several national publications, including *Sports Illustrated*. He won a 1988 National Headliner Award for general feature writing and has been included three times in *Best Sports Stories*, an annual anthology published by *The Sporting News*. His first book, *Somerset Homecoming*, written with the subject of one of his newspaper stories, was published by Doubleday in 1988. A collection of his nonfiction stories, *Fast Takes: Slices of Life Through a Journalist’s Eye*, was published by Hampton Roads Publishing Company, Inc. in 1990.

Where do you begin to research a story? It can be as simple as looking at newspaper clips or as complex as using the vast array of computer databases. Jo Cates and Ken Kister give you some of the places where you can start your search.

A Feature Writer’s Reference Library

Jo Cates and Ken Kister

A feature story is only as good as the research that goes into it.

Accurate, up-to-date information is not always easy to come by. Part of the problem, paradoxically, is the sheer amount of infor-

mation available, much of which is duplicated, dated and either unreliable or unsubstantiated. Since Gutenberg and the development of movable type, raw information has accrued at a dazzling pace, its output said to be doubling every ten years or so. Just the vastness of, say, the literature of medicine is enough to overwhelm all but the most intrepid researchers. One authority, for instance, estimates that it would require fifty-four centuries merely to read all of the medical literature generated last year alone. Pity the writer who tackles a luxuriant subject like sexually transmitted diseases.

But do not despair. An impressive array of reference material exists, designed to bring the knowledge glut under control and lead you through the information thicket. This material falls into two broad types of reference sources: print and electronic.

Print sources, the more familiar of the two, are traditional reference books found on library shelves, such as almanacs, dictionaries and encyclopedias.

Electronic sources, on the other hand, are comparatively new and innovative research tools that provide automated access to information via machine-readable disks and databases. Because they manipulate large quantities of data at lightning speed, electronic sources offer greater potential for effective retrieval of information than their print counterparts, but they also tend to be more expensive, and require training and skill on the part of the user.

Print Sources

First on any list of indispensable reference tools is a general desk dictionary, the writer's *vade mecum*. We emphatically recommend *Webster's New World Dictionary* (Third College edition), published in 1988 by Simon & Schuster. Adopted by the wire services and practically all major U.S. newspapers as their dictionary of first referral, *Webster's New World* is the most up-to-date, authoritative, best designed and user-friendly general English-language dictionary currently on the market.

Most writers also find a thesaurus or synonym dictionary a handy companion. Among the dozens available, we suggest *Webster's Collegiate Thesaurus* and *The Random House Thesaurus*. Likewise, there are few writers who will not find Strunk and White's little classic, *The Elements of Style*, helpful when dealing with the basics of standard English usage and composition.

A high-quality encyclopedia of basic knowledge, another essential source for any feature writer, provides both trustworthy factual information and easily understood summaries of complex subject matter. The 22-volume *World Book Encyclopedia* is, page for page, the best general encyclopedia published today.

Those who cannot afford or have no space for a multivolume encyclopedia should consider the single-volume *Concise Columbia Encyclopedia*, an inexpensive, reliable desk-sized compendium of encyclopedic knowledge.

Almanacs, yearbooks, handbooks and manuals complement encyclopedias, furnishing the researcher with a wealth of quick reference information. *The World Almanac* and the *Guinness Book of World Records* come readily to mind, and every subject field has its quick reference sources. In the case of medicine, for example, two important references are *The Merck Manual of Diagnosis and Therapy* and the *Physicians' Desk Reference*.

Writers frequently need geographic information found in atlases and gazetteers. Several excellent world atlases are on the market, but most critics agree that the current edition of *The Times Atlas of the World* (cartography by John Bartholomew & Son of Edinburgh) is the standard choice; it does cost more than \$100 however. The smaller *Goode's World Atlas* represents an inexpensive alternative in paperback. For the United States, the *Rand McNally Commercial Atlas and Marketing Guide* provides excellent state maps as well as much population and business data. Another very serviceable atlas is the annually revised paperbound *Rand McNally Road Atlas*, a longtime favorite that covers the U.S. (including a map for each state), Canada and Mexico.

Feature writers constantly require biographical information about people of all types. Among the best general sources are *Webster's Biographical Dictionary*, which offers brief sketches of roughly 40,000 historically significant persons, and the *Almanac of Famous People*, a three-volume set that covers some 25,000 notables from biblical times to the present. *Current Biography*, as its title suggests, covers contemporaries in the news; since its first appearance in 1940, *Current Biography*, which is issued monthly and cumulated into annual volumes, has set the standard for carefully researched yet readable short biographical profiles. *Who's Who in America*, on the other hand, offers only thumbnail data for biographers, but it does cover nearly 80,000 living persons, most of whom are Americans.

Writers and researchers should know that many libraries subscribe to a service called *Phonefiche*, a collection of nearly 3,000 telephone books (both white and yellow pages) from around the country on microfiche.

Covering private organizations is another essential directory, the *Encyclopedia of Associations*, which describes well over 25,000 groups concerned with everything from brain research to life insurance to sex (one recent edition, for instance, cites eleven organizations in the index under "Sexually Transmitted Diseases"). Two heavily consulted business directories are *Standard & Poor's Register of Corporations, Directors and Executives*, which offers basic information on some 50,000 businesses and their executives, and *Thomas' Register of American Manufacturers*, a multivolume listing of products and services.

Books in Print, now grown to ten volumes (three for authors, three for titles, three for subjects, and one for publishers), is essential for bibliographic data about books currently available from U.S. publishers. *BIP* is supplemented by the quarterly *Forthcoming Books*, which reports on books just published or announced for publication. Reviews of books can be located through *Book Review Digest*, which includes both citations to and excerpts from published reviews, and *Book Review Index*, which gives only citations.

Finding articles published in magazines entails use of indexes like the H.W. Wilson Company's *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, a popular library reference item since 1905 that provides subject indexing for close to 200 general interest magazines, and *Magazine Index*, a newer source developed in 1976 which lists approximately twice as many titles as *Reader's Guide* but is available only on microfilm.

Several major dailies have developed their own individual indexes, most notably the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. The *New York Times Index* is especially valuable for the feature writer, in that it furnishes detailed subject access from 1851 to the present to what most observers consider to be the newspaper of record in North America.

Electronic Sources

While many of the aforementioned print sources also are available on-line via computer, there are multitudes of databases for which no print equivalent exists.

Computer searching is not an act of magic. It's not a matter of pressing a few keys and—voilà—the information you seek is served up on a silver monitor. It is true, however, that with the aid of database systems and a savvy on-line searcher, a writer can unearth useful information on just about any issue, event, person, place or thing.

Searchers can link up with more than 3,000 on-line databases ranging from *Coffeeline* (yes, a database devoted entirely to the literature of coffee) to *America: History and Life*.

By using key words and controlled vocabulary or free text searching, users can retrieve everything from full text articles to citations to unpublished documents available on microfiche.

Computer searching can save you time. In addition, you can search for buzzwords or jargon that printed sources might not currently list, and, as you might have guessed, on-line sources are almost always more current than printed sources. But it is not a perfect world; most bibliographic databases date back no further than 20 years. (Most full text newspaper databases contain articles only from the 1980s.) For many topics, you must still rely on print and microfilm sources. Too, the costs of computer searching can be prohibitive.

The *NEXIS* system, probably the most familiar to journalists, is one of the most widely used systems in news libraries. Produced by Mead Data Central, the service contains full text articles from more than 160 newspapers, magazines and newsletters, including the *New York Times*. Mead also offers *LEXIS*, a database covering legal information, court decisions, statutes, legal cases, etc.

Other full text services, such as *DataTimes* and Knight Ridder's *Vu/Text*, focus on regional newspapers. *DataTimes* contains articles in newspapers ranging from the *Arkansas Gazette* to *Newsday*.

So how do you access these sources? Contact your public, university or state library and speak with a librarian or information professional trained to perform on-line searching. A good librarian can do you much more good, in fact, than all the fancy databases, and can save you money.

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Ken Kister is a freelance writer. He has worked as a librarian at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and at *The Tampa Tribune* in Florida. He is also

author of several reference book guides, including *Best Encyclopedias* (Oryx Press, 1986).

You have done your reporting and research. You might have been working on your material for only a few hours or maybe a few months. Now what do you do with it? How do you make the leap from raw notes and research to a story that flows?

You get yourself organized.

On short, "quick-hit" features, you might be able to work out the organization in your head, and then get it quickly down on paper. But as you grow in the profession and try more in-depth stories, you will probably find organization becomes more of a problem. You might have interview notes in one pile, tapes in another, legal documents in a third, newspaper clips in a fourth, and public relations handouts in a fifth.

For almost all writers this is the hardest stage of writing. And it will never be easy. But Jane Harrigan, a professor at the University of New Hampshire and former editor, can help you get all the pieces together.

Organizing Your Material

Jane Harrigan

Landing my first reporting job in 1976 taught me a few things that my journalism professors had neglected to mention. I learned how to live in New York on \$8,000 a year, and I learned that writing is a process made up of distinct steps. In those days, a model of my writing process would have looked like this:

report—write—curse & eat cookies—rewrite

Today, a few zillion stories and students later, I'd map the process this way:

report—ORGANIZE—write—curse & eat cookies—rewrite

Recognizing that second step has cut down on the cursing and rewriting, if not the cookies. But I fought organizing for years, and I've seen plenty of other writers fight it, too. Organizing sounds mundane. We want to believe that writing ability is some sort of cosmic gift—otherwise, how are writers different from other people? We want to believe that if we just plant ourselves at our typewriter or

the terminal, the story will spring from our fingers, perfect and clear.

Occasionally it does. Mostly it doesn't, and here's why: Writing is not the act of putting marks on paper. Writing is synthesizing, comparing, ordering—in short, writing is thinking. *That's* how writers are different from other people: Each of us wields our unique vision like a chisel, giving form to our raw observations. If you don't believe that writing is thinking, walk into any newsroom and look around. You won't see hordes of harried writers hunched over keyboards. Instead, you'll see a few people typing and a lot of people twisting their hair, bending paperclips, and counting the holes in the ceiling tiles. All of them are writing. Or, as the writer-bird explained to his nephew in Jeff MacNelly's comic strip "Shoe": "Typists pound keyboards. Writers stare out windows."

Four Vital Questions

Getting organized means giving yourself permission to stare out the window. Most people recognize the importance of thinking at one key stage in the process, the lull between reporting and writing. That's the time for asking yourself, over and over, the Universal Writer's Query: *What have I got?* But that's not the only time that organization comes into play. You also need to organize before and during reporting. Later in the process, you may need to *reorganize* as a prelude to rewriting. In other words, organization involves asking yourself four questions: What's my subject? What am I trying to say about that subject? How do I want to say it? Have I said it well enough?

Let's consider those questions individually.

What's Your Subject?

A good feature writer is a sponge, soaking in sights, sounds, smells and quotes in hopes that some of them, somehow, will bring the story to life. Like sponges, however, writers have limits; after a while, new details hit your saturated brain with a thud and simply drop away, unabsorbed. How can you be sure that the good ones sink in? The trick is to be organized, and part of the trick to being organized is remembering that you're not alone. Talk about your ideas with a fellow writer, a friend, a tolerant spouse. You never know when one of you will drop the comment that makes your brain shout, "That's

IT!" And when you're looking for someone to talk to, don't forget your editor.

Editors are not the enemy. They want the same thing you do—to publish a terrific story—and it's in their best interest to do everything possible to achieve that goal. Smart writers also recognize another goal of editors: never to be unpleasantly surprised.

The more you and your editor discuss your story in advance, the less time the editor will spend "fixing" the story to fit some image you didn't know he or she had. So it stands to reason that, even if you're freelancing, you should let your editor know what you're up to. Remember that editors are busy, and make sure not to disturb them on deadline. But remember, too, that exploring a story's possibilities with the writer is many editors' (and teachers') favorite part of their job. It certainly is mine.

Recently, one of my best feature-writing students told me that she wanted to do a story on bulimia. As I fought the urge to groan, she added, "I know everybody writes about eating disorders, so I want to do something different. Can you think of an angle?" We talked about why the subject interested her, and about the stories we'd both read. Gradually she decided that she wanted to focus on treatment, perhaps building the story around the experiences of a young woman who had acknowledged her problem and gone for help. We made a quick list of potential sources and then, 15 minutes after she'd arrived in my office, she was on her way. She had a focus. She was organized.

Once you start reporting, organization points you toward the appropriate details. When I spent a day with a roving newspaper photographer while researching a book, I knew that much of my chapter, like much of his workday, would take place inside his car. Having decided that, I could collect many more specifics than I would have otherwise: how many miles on the odometer, how many pairs of shoes in the trunk, what sounds came over each of his five radios.

Organization can also save you much grief during interviewing, allowing you, for example, to nudge a meandering subject back on track with a gentle, "That's very interesting, Mr. Smith, but I'd really like to hear about X." Unless you've clearly defined X, for your subject and for yourself, you won't be able to tell a digression from a revelation. Of course, stories change as you report them; if they didn't, writing would be a dull affair. Taking an occasional minute

to reorganize, and perhaps bounce new thoughts off your favorite sounding board, can pay big dividends later.

What Are You Trying to Say?

It's three hours before deadline and you're driving back to your office with 20 pages of notes and not much idea how to pull off the "quick, easy feature" your editor wanted. Or it's three days before deadline, and you're sitting on the floor surrounded by papers, wondering why this idea for a major feature sounded so good two weeks ago. In either case, you've reached the moment of truth, when a voice from on high—in my case it sounds a lot like Woody Allen's—needles you with the unshirkable question: "So what's the story?"

You need a focus. Then you need a form for expressing that focus. Those are the two steps to organizing your writing. Here are some exercises to help you climb the first step. You can try them while sitting at your desk, but most work equally well while you're driving your car or riding the subway or standing in a checkout line.

1. *Write a summary sentence.* What is your story about? Say it in one sentence, and be tough: The sentence must have a specific subject and an active verb. Or try writing it as a headline; that way, you can't settle for, "This is a story about X."

For one of my first features for the Associated Press, I remember panicking as I drove away from the final interview. Knowing I'd never be able to think once I returned to that madhouse bureau, I started talking to myself, telling myself the story. "Company sells house kits," I tried, then laughed at my own lameness. "House kits gaining popularity." *Ugh.* "You can build by numbers." *Closer.* "Dummies can build houses." *Hmmmm . . .* "Even klutzes can build their own castles." *Okay!* As soon as I uttered that sentence, I saw how the story could unfold. Mentally, I flipped through my notebook, labeling the categories of information I'd collected and then inserting each like a branch into the trunk formed by the summary sentence. Although the words "klutz" and "castle" never actually appeared in the story, the sentence kept me centered throughout the writing process.

Some writers carry tape recorders in their cars so as not to lose the ideas that can surface when the mind roams free. Even if you arrive at your focus by some method other than writing a summary

sentence, however, you'd be wise to try writing one before you submit your story. If you can't write the sentence, the story isn't finished yet.

2. *Rehearse leads.* Sometimes you write leads to figure out your focus. Sometimes you write leads because you have a focus but aren't sure where to take it. Either way, you're probably going to write a lot of leads for a feature—six, ten, maybe dozens. How to write those leads is the subject of another section of this book. At this point, though, it's important to realize the role the lead plays in organizing your story. A good lead pushes you forward with the energy created by your own words. You know you're onto something when you hit the end of the lead and just keep writing, sure of your direction. While a few writers can write the story first and the lead later, most of us find organizing without a lead as difficult as hiking on an unmarked trail.

Lead-writing, too, can be done at places other than your desk. Just create a blank screen in your mind; I picture the one on the silly black fortune-telling ball I had as a kid. Then see what floats to the surface. Often what you'll see is a contrast, especially a contrast between expectations and reality. The expectations might be your own (what you expected Miss America to be like, versus the tough-talking feminist you encountered), but more likely they'll be your subject's (the whiz-kid entrepreneur whose dreams went bust). Or the trigger might be a moment—like the moment when Paul Newman took off his jacket at a Walter Mondale campaign event in 1984, and every teenage girl in the room started to scream. Driving home hours later, I saw that moment over and over and knew it was the lead for my story on celebrity campaigning. The trigger might be a sound—like the voice that journalist Oriana Fallaci used to dismiss the admiring questions of young writers at a seminar. I drafted dozens of leads for that story, but her voice kept drowning them out. Eventually I realized that her attitude was not only the lead but the backbone of the story.

Whatever leads form on your mental screen, make sure they either fit the focus you've chosen or point you toward a new one you can carry throughout the story. The Paul Newman lead worked because the story showed that celebrities simply build excitement for political campaigns. It wouldn't have worked on a story alleging that celebrities actually sway votes. As you organize your story, you're

going to throw away a lot of good information and even more good leads. A wonderful lead becomes a terrible lead at the moment that you realize it leads nowhere.

3. *Write an ending.* Organization means knowing where you're going before you start. Carrying this dictum to a logical extreme, try writing the ending first. The ending can serve as a tow rope, pulling you up the long hill that looms between you and a finished story. This technique only rarely works for me, but I know many writers who swear by it. One caution: Don't save all of your best stuff for the end. Readers might never get there.

4. *Write without notes.* Obviously, no responsible nonfiction writer works entirely without notes. But sketching out a draft "freehand" can go a long way toward showing you what you want to say. Notes are like Velcro. As you try to skim them, they ensnare you, and pretty soon you can't see the story for the details. In my work as a writing consultant for newspapers, I'm often asked to help intelligent, interesting people who write dull stories. Almost invariably, it turns out that these people are trying to transform their notes into the story—sometimes physically, by typing their notes into a computer and then rearranging them into sentences. They do this because they don't trust their own instincts. In the great tradition of writers everywhere, they lack confidence.

Until you develop confidence as a writer, fake it. Fake it by repeating these words over and over, like a mantra: "The story is not in my notes; the story is in my head." Then believe it. No matter how many wonderful details you've jotted down, the details are not the story. A video camera can collect details and play them back; a writer must do more. The story is what you make of those details—the connections and patterns you see, the way you arrange them to support your focus. Hiding your notebook as you start to write can release you from the tyranny of details, freeing you to see the big picture.

How Will I Say It?

Now that you have a focus, you need a structure, a container to keep your ideas from oozing onto the page in a shapeless mass. Although the classic inverted-pyramid structure isn't an option for a feature, some other established structures might be worth considering. First,

however, you'll want to organize your notes and make an outline. Much as you may pine for divine inspiration, the fact is that good writers plan each story. If the plan refuses to take shape in your head, or fades as quickly as it forms, it's time to organize on paper.

Organizing your notes needn't take long. Read through them once, quickly, and then make a list—not of the facts, but of the broad categories of information. For example, when one of my students finished researching the decline in Peace Corps volunteers at our university, she skimmed her notes and listed these categories: Statistics, History, One Volunteer's Story, The Recruiter's Perspective, Student Expectations, Peace Corps Expectations, Outlook for Future. She chose an abbreviation for each category, then labeled each section of her notes with the appropriate abbreviation. Because the material seemed manageable, she didn't cut her notes apart by category and put each category into a separate folder. That's something to consider, however, when you're tackling a long, complex story. For a fascinating account of the system used by a master organizer and writer, read the introduction to *The John McPhee Reader* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976). You'll never look at darts in the same way again.

After labeling, you're ready to synthesize. It's a lot easier to figure out the relationships among seven categories of facts than it is to impose an order on hundreds of separate pieces of information. Look at your categories, choose the one you think is most important or interesting, and outline possible ways of tying the remaining categories to the central one and to one other. Don't panic at the word "outline." We're not talking about the Roman numeral exercises that tormented you in grammar school—the ones that Pulitzer-winning feature writer Jon Franklin calls "English Teacher's Revenge." (Franklin describes his own elaborate outlining system in his book *Writing for Story*, Atheneum, 1976.) An outline can be as simple as a few words scrawled on a scrap of paper, or as elaborate as a detailed "recipe" you keep on one side of your computer's split screen. Either way, the point is to apply your intellect to your material. Outlining is to the writer what visualizing is to the athlete. Just as high jumpers visualize their jump mentally before performing it physically, writers outline their course before embarking on it.

The writer of the Peace Corps story, for example, considered using the volunteer's experiences as a frame for the other information she'd collected. But the story "refused to be outlined" in that form, she told me, so she tried another idea. She decided to write

the story as a series of contrasts—between past and present, inside and outside, the average student's apathy, and the volunteer's enthusiasm. When an outline based on that idea came together in two minutes, she raced out to start writing.

Five Writing Structures

Organizing and outlining take much less time than you'd think. Valuable as they are, they can become a convenient way to procrastinate, to avoid facing the blank page or screen. When you find yourself wondering whether you're ready to start writing, you probably are. That's when you'll encounter, head on, what's simultaneously most exciting and most intimidating about feature writing: There are no rules. You can put the information together in any way you please. As long as you stick to the facts, you have every conceivable writing technique at your disposal. Before long, you'll be inventing structures that no one's ever used before. When you're new to the game, however, it can be reassuring to try some of the many structures that have worked for other writers before you. Here are five:

1. *The hourglass.* This term, christened a few years ago to describe certain news stories, can apply to features as well. An hourglass story starts out like an inverted pyramid, arranging information in descending order of importance. Then, at the "waist" of the hourglass, the story shifts gears, relating the remaining information in chronological order. You'll often find the hourglass structure in crime stories, where a few paragraphs answering the 5 W's are followed by a sentence such as, "Police gave this account of the robbery." Feature writers can apply a variation of the hourglass to stories that follow a natural time sequence, such as day-in-the-life stories (a day in the life of a substitute teacher, or a judge, or a radio d.j.). Just be sure that your introduction establishes your focus and tone and promises enough surprises so that readers don't feel they're reading a transcript.

2. *The spatial story.* Most stories are organized logically, but some are organized spatially, using physical space to determine the order. This structure can work especially well when geography defines the focus. For example, in a story chronicling the economy's effects on one neighborhood, you might want the story to move from house to

house, leading the reader on a tour of the street. A spatial structure defines a world, as National Public Radio did when Tip O'Neill retired from Congress. A reporter followed O'Neill from room to room in the Capitol as he said his goodbyes and described the memories that flooded him. Another variation of the spatial story mimics an actual shape, as in a story on bureaucratic waffling that is deliberately written in circles, or an environmental story that doubles back on itself to show how species are interrelated.

3. *The story in scenes.* Ever since Tom Wolfe's 1972 essay defining the New Journalism (indispensable reading for any nonfiction storyteller), writers have recognized the importance of scene-by-scene construction. Most stories stitch the scenes together into a seamless narrative. Occasionally, however, a story can best be told in short bursts, through discrete scenes separated by bullets or some other typographical device. You'll sometimes see this structure in profiles, where the writer shows the subject in different situations to reveal different personality traits. A story on a large event, such as a protest march, can also lend itself to this technique, allowing readers to see the action through many different people's eyes. I remember especially fondly a story I once read on Valentine's Day, in which an accumulation of short scenes showed both how ridiculous people thought the holiday was, and how seriously they were taking it.

4. *Parallel narratives.* Reading is an integral part of writing, and you can't give yourself a better gift than the chance to reread Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. There you'll find all the nascent techniques of literary journalism, plus a structure you might be able to borrow—parallel narratives. Throughout the first part of the book, killers and victims follow their separate courses, moving toward the inevitable collision. Parallel narratives can also work with less dramatic subjects: the young man and woman in their frantic separate preparations for the prom, the daily routines at two schools of the same size but different budgets. I once edited a story that interspersed scenes of a potter working at her wheel with scenes from her everyday life as a secretary. It worked; each narrative illuminated the other, and by the end the reader felt the same longing as the secretary who couldn't afford to devote herself to art.

5. *Distance as structure.* As a writer, you view your subject through an adjustable lens, choosing for some purposes a distant, wide-angle

view, for others an up-close, telephoto study. In some stories you can use these varying distances to establish the structure. To show how old-timers and newcomers are clashing as New Hampshire grows, for example, *The Boston Globe* reporter Bob Hohler took readers to the town of Bath. His story starts with a description of the town as if seen from a distant hilltop. It moves in closer and closer until, by the end, the reader is inside the apartment of the couple whom many old-timers blame for the town's changes. Readers might not notice the device, but they do notice their growing understanding of the controversy. This structure can also be used in reverse, starting close to an issue and then backing up to place it in a wider context.

Whatever structure you choose, you'll quickly realize that an organized story does not need transitions, at least not the words like "however" and "therefore" that you were taught to use back in the days of English Teacher's Revenge. Instead, think of each idea in your story as an island. Your task is to write bridges between the islands to keep your readers from drowning. The only strong building material for these bridges is logic. From each paragraph pull out one thread, one aspect of the paragraph's central idea, and bring it forward to the next paragraph, knotting it securely by repeating a word or showing a similarity or difference. If this logical connection doesn't exist, or isn't spelled out clearly enough for readers to recognize, no number of transitional words will be strong enough to ferry readers to the next island.

Have I Said It Well Enough?

In the ideal world, you would write a feature, walk away from it for at least a day, then go back and polish it. In the real world, you'll sometimes be lucky to walk away from it for an hour. Even a few minutes of "downtime" will suffice if you can discipline yourself to return to the story with a fresh eye. (If you can't, have a blunt friend read your draft and ask you questions.) Editing yourself requires a complex shift in outlook that takes time to develop. You can speed the process by learning to handle two common situations: a story that needs reorganizing, and a story that needs reconceiving.

Let's return to the Peace Corps story. Although the writer started out feeling organized, she later came to my office with her first draft and announced, "This is a mess." On one hand, she was wrong: The information was strong. On the other, she was right: It

seemed to come in no particular order. Together we resurrected the list of abbreviations she'd used to label her notes, and we applied those categories to the story. In the margin next to each paragraph, she labeled the type of information it contained. Then, reading down the margins, she was able to see places where the categories followed in a logical sequence, and others where the sequence either wasn't logical or wasn't explained well enough for readers to see its logic.

By this time she was so tired of the story that she grabbed some scissors, cut the text into paragraphs, and reassembled them on her bedroom floor. A little mechanistic, perhaps, but it worked. It can work for you, too—at least the labeling of paragraphs can—when you can't figure out why a story doesn't flow. Try it the other way, too. When you read a story you admire, cut the paragraphs apart, mix them up, and, as you try to put them back in order, see if you can figure out the structural devices the writer used.

The writer of the bulimia story had a different problem. Her first draft was thoroughly reported, wonderfully organized, and very dull. She knew it, but she didn't know what to do about it, and neither did I. That's where talking with your editor can come into play again. The writer and I sat and talked about the bulimia story, neither of us knowing where the conversation would lead. Gradually, as she explained her interest in the subject, we both began to realize that the story was much more personal than her writing had acknowledged. Her friend Wendy had nearly died of bulimia before getting treatment, and the writer herself had veered perilously close to the disorder from time to time. She decided to rewrite, using Wendy's story to frame the other information and adding occasional first-person sections for her own view.

This time, she wrote the ending first. It describes a moment after Wendy had returned from the hospital, feeling wonderful and no longer obsessed with food. "She told me she was going to throw her scale away," the writer wrote. "I told her to give it to me instead."

The process of feature writing presents you with a choice: You can fight organization as an annoying waste of time, or you can accept it as a challenge that will sharpen both your thinking and your writing. Once you really begin to concentrate on organizing, you may amaze yourself by starting to enjoy it—even the outlining. Suddenly an idea will fall into place with an almost audible click, and you'll remember why you wanted to be a writer.

Organization and structure can't happen without focus. So I'll leave you with the example of my friend Sue Hertz, a magazine writer whose skills I've always admired. One afternoon as I was climbing the stairs to her apartment, she yelled down a warning: "Watch out! I'm in the middle of a piece, and the place is a mess." Inside, her writing room looked just like mine, piles of papers covering every horizontal surface. Then something on the windowsill caught my eye. It was an index card with a single sentence written on it.

"What's that?" I asked.

"That's the point," Sue replied. "I put it there so I always know where to find it."

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If writing were a religion, what you are about to read would be considered blasphemy. Nonetheless, here it is: *Striving for throat-grabbing, punchy leads is mostly a waste of time.* Say that aloud—especially in a newsroom—and hordes of old-time copy and news editors would puff up into great balls of indignation and fall upon the infidel with very sharp little pencils. But, alas, we are talking feature stories, and here rules are made to be broken, especially when they have little relevance to the real world of writing. So clear your mind, forget what your teachers and mentors may have been preaching all these years about snappy leads, and listen to the good word about beginnings.

Think Beginnings, Not Leads

Leonard Witt

After spending a lot of time trying to find wonderful leads, I came to the conclusion that leads are not as important as they have been made out to be. At first I wanted to do as William Ruehlmann did in his book *Stalking the Feature Story*, where he gave examples of leads like this one written by Mike Winerip for the *Louisville Courier-Journal*:

Louisville is home for Ralph W. Ray, leading dustpan magnate of the free world.

In less than three seconds, his dustpan factory, J.V. Reed & Co., produces a dustpan. (Thump-a-blimp.) More than 20 a minute. (Thump-a-blimp, thump-a-blimp.) More than 1,300 an hour. (Thump-a-blimp, thump-a-blimp, thump-a-blimp.) More than six million every year. (THUMP-A-BLIMP!) Twenty percent of the dustpans for the non-Communist world.

It is a clever lead. At one time or another all feature writers have written a lead like this. And that is fine. The writer was striving to make the words work. To have fun. To break traditional rules. There's rhythm in the writing; it plays off the subject. But, alas, it is a gimmick that you might use once in a few hundred stories.

I know because I read several hundred leads in search of clever ones and I found almost none. However, as I searched for great leads I found that I was getting pulled into many stories even though the leads were not special. They were simply honest to the story's subject matter. I read on if the story was compelling and if the opening words moved the story along. The leads did not grab me by the throat as great leads of yesterday were supposed to do. In fact, many times those throat grabbers draw so much attention to the writer that you think more of the writer than of the flow of the story. Sometimes that works, but, in the long run, leads don't make great writers—well-written, compelling stories do.

Now my discovery was not really a revelation. I have been fortunate to have worked with many great feature writers over the years, and their best stories rarely have throat-grabbing leads. Most often they ease you into the story instead.

This does not mean beginnings of stories are unimportant. They are extremely important. They set the tone for the whole story. However, the problem with the concept of a *lead* is that it is most often approached as a separate entity. Over the years, the lead has been viewed in terms of a hook or almost a gimmick. The "thump-a-blimp" leads were praised, especially in newspapers, because all too often the beginnings of newspaper stories were so convoluted and boring they simply went "thump."

No one wants a story, and especially its beginning, to go thump. So instead of spending a lot of time thinking of the clever lead, think of the whole story. Most well-written features, like most well-told stories, have a beginning, a middle and an end. The writer will know about reporting, voice, tone, rhythm, character development, dialogue and scene setting—and will bring these rich writing traditions

to the opening of the story and keep them flowing throughout. Punchy and clever might work for some stories, but the writer who aims for that combination in every story is aiming far too low.

Prevent Lead Anxiety

Once you think of the story as a whole, the beginning comes almost naturally. However, it won't necessarily come easily. I remember reading somewhere about how Jimmy Breslin hunched over his typewriter and stuffed a piece of paper in it; he'd type a few lines, then rip the paper out of the typewriter, crumble it into a ball, and toss it to the floor. This exercise would go on for a while with sheet after sheet of paper ripped from the typewriter, wadded up, and cast to the floor. Eventually, however, a sheet would go into the typewriter and the keys would begin slapping against the paper and would not stop. One sentence, then another, then another, and Breslin was on his way to writing his story.

Today, in the age of the computer, there are fewer wadded up pieces of paper, but no less anguish in trying to start a story. The anguish comes not just from the fear of having a thumpy lead, but also because in the beginning there is nothing in front of you. No words on the paper with which you can start an inner dialogue. But once the words begin to flow, one word plays off another, then one sentence off of another, then one paragraph after another, and finally a story is written.

As an editor I try to help writers identify possible beginnings in the prewriting stage. As they collect information while reporting, I ask plenty of questions, and I listen to their answers for potential leads.

When James Thornton, an excellent St. Paul-based freelance writer, was working on a story about moms getting called to war, he told me of one military family where both mother and father were called to the Persian Gulf and their 18-month-old child had to stay with relatives in Minnesota. A pediatrician told the family the child would quickly forget what his parents looked like. To help him remember, the temporary guardians would unfold a life-size photo of the parents once a day. The child would stop whatever he was doing, move toward the photo, and smile. As soon as I heard that, I knew we had a story and a lead. As it turned out, Thornton opted for another lead, but this one would have been there if needed.

As I write this, another freelancer, Jon Tevlin, is working on a story on open enrollment in Minnesota schools. Parents in the state can send their kids across district lines to whatever school they deem best for the kids' education. Each morning one family in exurbia puts their kids in a cab and sends them off to another school district. The cab fare is some \$80 a week or \$4,000 a year. In my mind I can see the story beginning with the cab stopping at the house, mom kissing the kids good-bye, and the kids leaving in the cab, which weaves around a lake or two and eventually arrives at the school. The kids quite conspicuously get out of the cab and begin their day at school.

Again in the prewriting stage, I can see a possible lead. And seeing it early helps take the pressure off both the writer and the editor. Tevlin might find a better lead or decide this anecdote works better somewhere else in the story. But no matter, there is a potential lead and he has identified it early, and it will take pressure off him when he eventually sits down to write.

Forget the Rules

As with all writing, there really are no fixed rules. Stories can begin with quotes, description, dialogue, questions, anecdotes or an action sequence. It all depends on the tone that you as a writer want to present. Some people advocate writing many leads to get a story started and that is not a bad idea. On the other hand, if those first sentences are not coming to you as quickly as you might like, my recommendation is to stop fretting and start writing. If the lead doesn't work after you look at the finished story, then rewrite it. Or search in the finished story to see if the real lead floated down further into the story. Editors often talk of the throat-clearing syndrome where writers seem to have a couple of false starts before really letting the story begin.

Here is an example of a story I recently received where I believed the writer was just one paragraph away from the true beginning. He started his story like this:

Ann Smith, a native Bostonian, graduated from Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, 20 years ago. That same day she hitched a ride to the North Woods, where she still resides, living her dream in a cabin three miles northwest of Ely, Minnesota, in the Superior National Forest, on the edge of civilization.

Just after that opening he wrote:

One night last July Smith was awakened at 12:30 in the morning by the sound of an intruder in her kitchen. She did what any modern frontierswoman would do, she dialed 911. But a half hour passed and the sheriff's deputy hadn't arrived. The intruder was making a suspicious amount of noise, so Smith poked her nose downstairs. There she found, seated at the kitchen table, a yearling bear—butt on chair, elbows on table, face buried in a pan of brownies her son had baked that evening.

The woman whom he describes in his original first paragraph really plays no part in the rest of the story, so there was little reason to develop her. With a little rewriting that second paragraph should have been the lead. It is more compelling and honest to the rest of the story, which is about black bears and their relations to humans.

Honesty Is the Best Policy

Honesty to the rest of the story is important. Readers do not want to be deceived. You shouldn't promise them one thing and then deliver another. However, you can make your beginning interesting even if the root of your subject matter might be dull. A medical column by Neil Ravin in *The Washingtonian* magazine began like this:

He was 12 years old, and every day he pedaled furiously on his stationary bicycle for as many hours as they would allow him. He was so absorbed in his effort that it was all they could do to get him to stop for meals.

In fact, before he was hospitalized at a psychiatric institution he had been unwilling to stop for meals, for schoolwork, for the simple exchanges of ordinary life. At age 12, he had lost almost 30 pounds. He looked, in the language of the ward, cachectic, or in the language of his friends, as if he had been an inmate in a concentration camp.

This lead forces you into the story. It provides mystery, an element that William Blundell touts in his book, *The Art and Craft of Feature Writing*. Blundell says not revealing everything will force the reader to get into the story, and once a reader has made a commitment, he will read on as I did with the story about the "bicycle boy." I read on even though the story turned out to be a rather complicated one about Lyme disease—a story I would not have read if the lead had not captured me, and one I might have stopped reading if the

mystery had been revealed too quickly. This "bicycle boy" lead, which really went on for eight paragraphs, did one other thing. It humanized a story that otherwise would have been a fairly dull medical story. Getting people into beginnings will often make the story more readable, and feature stories provide the most opportunities of any stories to get people into them.

However, just having people in a lead is not enough. If the medical writer had started his story with a woman having arthritic knees, it might have been too weak a way to start out a story on Lyme disease. If our kids going to another school district had just boarded a school bus rather than a taxi, that too might not have been enough. They would not have been special anecdotes. Think of your own life. Most of what happens to you is mundane. But occasionally a wonderful or unusual thing happens and you tell that story often. In mining for lead material in your reporting, don't settle for the mundane; look for the compelling, humorous, sad, offbeat or intriguing.

Sometimes, however, the simple, straightforward lead is just fine. Not long ago Cheryl Lavin, a feature writer, was a finalist in the "Best Newspaper Writing Contest" sponsored annually by the American Society of Newspaper Editors. Among her entries was this very straightforward lead:

A lot of people who think they love Lily Tomlin really love Jane Wagner. Jane puts the words in Lily's mouth. She writes her material, she creates her characters, she makes her sound smart, she makes her sound funny. She works with her, she lives in a Spanish-style house in the Hollywood Hills with her, she protects her, she mothers her, she fusses over her, she finishes her sentences, she even reads her mind.

Forget about the idea of mystery here. Lavin has told everything right up front. She summarized the entire story in the first paragraph, and if you care about Lily Tomlin you will read on. As an editor, my own inclination would have been to push the writer to start out setting a scene, where we could see them interacting rather than just have Lavin tell us. But Lavin took a different approach, and it worked. She started out *telling* us about Wagner and Tomlin and then went on to *show* us in the second and succeeding paragraphs as follows:

The two are huddled over breakfast at the Mayfair Regent Hotel.

They're talking about the cult following inspired by Wagner's play, "The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe." Tomlin starred in the one-woman show for a sold-out year on Broadway and recently moved it to L.A. She called it "the Saturday Night Fever of the theater" because the diehards come back to see it over and over again.

Says Lily, "People have come to see it five, six times, even mo . . ."

" . . . one woman told us she had seen it 17 times!" says Jane.

"Well, she was a little over the edge," says Lily. "She also had 'Jane' tattooed on her arm. Uh . . ." She catches herself and stops.

"What were you going to say?" a reporter asks.

She shakes her head. "Nothing."

"She's afraid this all sounds so self-serving," says Jane.

And on Lavin goes, establishing throughout the story what she set up in the beginning. Hers is not a delicate or funny lead, but simply a workhorse that got us into the story and mapped out a direction for it. More often in fine writing that direction setting is more subtle than the Tomlin/Wagner beginning, but to be effective it has to direct us into the story and give us a realistic idea where the story is going. It also has to move us forward.

Using Description

In the hands of novices, stories that start with description often slow us down rather than move us forward. Lead descriptions shouldn't be just description for description's sake.

Too often it is written as if someone is sitting on a bench looking at a flower garden—a very passive business. However, when I go to a park I hardly ever see anyone just sitting. Most people are on the move. Walking, jogging, skating, biking. In a like manner, your story beginnings should have the metaphorical feel of leading someone down a path to a destination. Walk them slowly and let them sniff the roses or get them moving at breakneck speed. The pace is up to you.

Paul Theroux's travel story "Sunrise with Seamonsters," in a collection of his work by the same name, is a wonderful example of a quiet, descriptive lead that moves the reader right into the story. It begins:

The boat slid down the bank and without a splash into the creek, which was gray this summer morning. The air was woolly with mist.

The tide had turned, but just a moment ago, so there was still no motion on the water—no current, not a ripple. The marsh grass was a deeper green for there being no sun. It was as if—this early and this dark—the day had not yet begun to breathe.

I straightened the boat and took my first stroke: the gurgle of the spoon blades and the sigh of the twisting oarlock were the only sounds. I set off, moving like a water bug through the marsh and down the bendy creek to the sea.

You are the writer, and should be in control. It is your story. Make things happen. Keep movement in the story, but the movement doesn't have to be breathless, quick-paced writing. Theroux, for example, gives the reader plenty of time to smell the morning, but never gets bogged down in the marsh.

Quotes and Questions

As for starting with quotes and questions I would follow the advice of Andre Fontaine and William A. Glavin, Jr. in their book *The Art of Writing Nonfiction*. They wrote, "Two types of leads used by inexperienced writers usually fail: quotations and questions. The quotation lead is generally ineffective because most quotations need explanation to be understood, and explanatory material can slow down the lead. Besides, any writer who can't write better than most people speak, is in the wrong field. Having said all that, we should point out that . . . in writing all rules are made to be broken. As for questions, a good rule to follow is that a writer's job is to answer them, not ask them."

Now underline the part above about breaking the rules because here comes Gay Talese with his classic magazine piece on boxer Joe Louis:

"Hi, sweetheart!" Joe Louis called to his wife, spotting her waiting for him at the Los Angeles airport.

She smiled, walked toward him, and was about to stretch out up on her toes and kiss him—but suddenly stopped.

"Joe," she said, "where's your tie?"

"Aw, Sweetie," he said, shrugging. "I stayed out all night in New York and didn't have time—"

"All night!" she cut in. "When you're out here all you do is sleep, sleep, sleep."

"Sweetie," Joe Louis said, with a tired grin. "I'm an ole man."

In the next couple of weeks spend some time reading leads. Analyze them. You'll find they come in all shapes and sizes just as do the writers themselves. Borrow the techniques from the best writers. But don't look for a formula. Let each story dictate its own beginning, and (I might add) its own ending also.

Endings are, in fact, as important as beginnings because when written well they allow the reader to walk away with a lasting reminder of what the story was about. Some people talk of summary endings, where the story is quickly summed up at the end. Others talk of a circle where the end plays off something that happened in the beginning of the story and tends to wrap it all together. Another category is the snapper where there is a shock or revelation.

However, as with leads, the endings should not be gimmicks, but logical conclusions. Once the words start coming out onto the page, they should lead the writer as much as he leads them. Sometimes the ending will be much different than originally planned and that is fine as long as it does something special for the reader. Flat or abrupt endings can kill an otherwise wonderful story.

Unfortunately, newspapers still put far less importance on the ending than the sacred lead. That's because newspapers traditionally cut off the end of stories when faced with a last minute space crunch. That happens fewer times now than in the past, but newspaper traditions, even bad ones, don't die easily. That's why often you will read newspaper stories and wonder why they didn't just take them a little further. Of course, that's better than asking the opposite question: God, when are they going to finish this thing?

And the answer, of course, always must be when the story has run its natural course and the writer has nothing else important left to say.

End Words

Afterthoughts: More Points to Remember

1. Some nonfiction writers are fine reporters, but their stories plod along. Just as bad are writers who turn a nice phrase, but have nothing to say. The art of feature writing requires that you both gather facts—that's reporting—and have a sense of what makes words flow.

2. Being a good writer and a good reporter don't happen overnight. Both skills have to be refined and then eventually merged. They take practice. Try all forms of writing. Sure, try some stories that don't need much reporting, such as a reminiscence. An essay. An opinion piece. A parody. You might even sell some. But don't stop there. Go out and report. Interview people, do research, and then write again. If it plods along, don't quit. Try again. Try merging your free-form styles with your reporting. Eventually you will write a story rich with facts that has your special style. And that will be a story that will sell.

3. Impressions from interviews are like dreams: when they're fresh in your mind, you think you'll remember them forever, but they fade. As soon after an interview as possible, record notes, atmosphere, and impressions in your computer, in your notebook, or somewhere you will not lose them.

4. Sometimes you will only get one chance to interview a person, but if you are doing an in-depth profile, chances are it will take a few interviews to get more than a surface understanding of your subject.

5. Every writer will find his or her own interview style, but most often the "tough cop" interview style will turn interviewees off and cause them to be suspicious of your motives. The best advice is to try a low-key approach, looking on the interview more as a conversation than an interrogation. Interview expert Kay Miller says interviewing, reduced to its simplest form, is good conversation—perhaps more carefully crafted than dinner table patter, and often, certainly, more intense.

6. Without tough questions, you will be limited to wishy-washy answers. However, save the "toughies" until late in the interview when both you and the interviewee are more at ease. If you don't quite understand something, ask about it, even if it makes you feel dumb to ask. Remember this advice from feature writer William Ruehlmann who wrote the book, *Stalking the Feature Story*: "The 'dumb' question may elicit a definite response. Should you avoid it, you may walk away with a hole in your story. The genuinely dumb question is the unasked one."

7. Tape recorders allow you to concentrate on the whole person

rather than just scribbling quotes. However, every reporter relies on handwritten notes for at least some of a story. In fact, many writers never use a tape recorder. First, learn to take notes. Practice it as much as possible. Then when you use a tape recorder, think of it as more of a backup than a primary or sole method of note collection. A couple of electronic or tape snafus will reinforce this advice.

8. Honesty is the best policy in interviewing. Don't try to deceive your interview subjects. Tell them who you are and where you plan to publish the story. Tell them you want to gather all the facts you can, which might include some negatives among the positives. Most importantly, emphasize that you will be fair, then *be* fair. Cheap shots work sometimes, but eventually you will have trouble getting entrée to future stories.

9. The best interviews are done face-to-face. Of course, phone interviews are fine for peripheral players or hard-to-get-at interviewees, such as those out of town. Indeed, all feature writers and freelancers spend a lot of time on the phone. The problem begins when they become office bound and never get more than talking heads in their stories.

10. Most professional journalists don't allow people being interviewed to read their stories before they are printed. If people want control over stories written about them, they should hire a public relations firm. Your job is to report accurately and fairly.

11. Never start a story without looking up past newspaper or magazine stories on the person you are writing about. If nothing else, it is a way to protect your integrity. Nothing is more embarrassing than to write about someone and then find he had a checkered past. Past stories are often rich with information and most often they are quick and easy to obtain.

12. Don't forget public documents such as probate files, divorce files, voter registration records, criminal and civil court records, traffic violation records and legal depositions. Anything that has been litigated will produce a wealth of information. In touchy cases where people refuse to talk, they may have already said plenty in public court documents. Go to the county, city and state court and ask for help in finding records.

13. Don't forget public information from government agencies

such as the Census Bureau and the National Weather Service. Indeed, the federal government is the biggest publisher in the world. Each major town has repositories of U.S. government pamphlets and documents. Ask a librarian for help.

14. Of course, there's also usually plenty of written material available locally. At some time every feature writer will have to search out old high school yearbooks for profile information and photos. Don't forget telephone books, city directories, reverse directories and business directories. The list is nearly endless.

15. The advent of computer databases has made available access to most major newspapers around the country and even around the world. Of course, this is not for free. Find out what it might cost before you start tapping into any electronic source. The cost could be prohibitive. Also, remember that most newspaper libraries only went electronic in the 1980s. If the sweet old grandma you are interviewing killed someone in 1970, you might not find out about it in the electronic clips.

16. When researching one story, always be alert to information that may be the seed for another story. Often the serendipitous finds make the best stories.

17. Have an idea of where your story is headed before you do the research. The better defined a story is, the easier it is to put parameters on your research. You don't want to become so overwhelmed with information that you can't figure out where or even when to start writing. This is most important for a freelancer, for whom lost time is lost money.

18. Here is advice from Jane Harrigan worth repeating in its entirety: "Writing is synthesizing, comparing, ordering—in short, writing is thinking. That's how writers are different from other people: Each of us wields our unique vision like a chisel, giving form to our raw observations."

19. Also from Jane Harrigan: "The story is not in my notes; the story is in my head." Of course, you must use your notes to support the facts and provide the details, but the story is what you make of those details—the connections and patterns you see and the way you arrange them to keep your story unfolding so readers can't stop reading.

20. To help you decide what your story is, try writing a headline or a summary sentence with a noun and an active verb. It should help give your story focus, and give you direction.

21. A story's lead should engage readers' attention and also make them want to read further. Adding a bit of mystery to the lead will help accomplish this goal. However, it is important that the lead does not deceive the reader. Don't make enticing promises that don't later materialize.

22. Don't be discouraged if you have trouble with your leads. Many writers are naturally intimidated by the blank page. Later in the story, a form of dialogue takes place between the words on the paper and the writer, and one sentence begins to play off another. If it helps you, start writing the body of your story and worry about the lead later.

23. You are better off saving complex information for the body of the story. When readers get to it, they've already made an investment and will be more likely to stay with your story. If the story starts out complex, they are likely to move on to something else.

Exercises

1. Sharpen your basic research skills. Go to the library and find the *New York Times Index*, the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* and the *Encyclopedia of Associations*. These are just a beginning. Also become familiar with the electronic databases now available. There are hundreds of them and your librarian can help guide you in the right direction.

2. Take a well-written story, such as the avalanche story which follows, (How the Pros Do It—Writing Sample #3). Pretend you are a fact checker. Go through the story and see how many obviously gathered facts, bits of information, and quotes come from solid reporting. How long does it take you to reach the 100 mark?

Here are starred (*) examples from the first two paragraphs:

“At about 20 minutes past 11* on a warm Sunday morning* in early February,* 6-year-old* Taylor Huddleston* and his cousins, Erwin Effler,* 6,* and Michael Effler,* 4,* were playing* in the snow.*

Below them*, in the driveway* of the Mountain Sunrise Condominiums,* the Efflers' father, Erwin,* was helping load luggage* in an airport limousine van* as the families got ready to leave Mount Crested Butte.* They had expected to leave a couple days earlier,* on Friday,* Feb. 3,* but a heavy snowstorm had closed the airport* in nearby Gunnison* for two days,* extending the Efflers' and Huddlestons' skiing vacation.*

Notice all the wonderful details and facts that make those two paragraphs work. There are more than 20 solid factual pieces of information. That's reporting. Continue with that story and check off the places where solid information is woven in.

3. Next time you interview the main characters in your story be sure to include time with them at home or at their place of work or play—whatever habitat is central to the theme of your story. Interview, or at least watch, the teacher at her school, the firefighter at the fire station, the industrial manager on the plant floor.

4. Next time you go out with a friend, pretend that you are interviewing the person without taking notes. Don't force it. Keep it in a conversational mode. Try not to let the person know what you are doing. Try to get him or her to do all the talking. You listen and ask interesting questions to keep the conversation going. Try the simple "Why?" when you want to understand motivations, or "I'm not sure what you mean" when something isn't entirely clear. If it works with a friend, it should work with people you are interviewing.

5. Try Jane Harrigan's suggestion of taking a piece of writing you especially enjoy, physically cutting it up, and shuffling the pieces. Now try to put it back together again, noticing, as you fit the pieces, the devices the writer used in giving the story structure.

6. When you have some time before your next story, try writing the lead three or four dozen times. Some will be junkers, but you might just see they improve as you delve for something more than the obvious. Remember, leads are important because they can set the tempo for the rest of the story.

Further Reading

1. *The Art and Craft of Feature Writing* by William E. Blundell (Plume—New American Library, 1988). How feature writing is done

at the *Wall Street Journal*. An excellent book for novice and advanced writers.

2. *Stalking the Feature Story* by William Ruehlmann (Vintage Books, 1977). A nuts and bolts book on how to find, research and construct a feature story. Good advice, though some examples are a bit dated.

How the Pros Do It

Writing Sample Number 3

If you can master the kind of story Claire Martin of *The Denver Post* does in this example, you will have a fertile freelance or staff writing career anywhere you choose. This is a perfect example of writing about an issue and humanizing it.

The story concerns avalanches in Colorado. Martin uses the three boys in the story to humanize it, although it is not a story about them. If it were, we would have learned more about the boys, and probably less about avalanches. But we only know them in relation to how they were affected by the avalanche.

The novice writer may well have simply recounted the action sequences involving the boys because they're dramatic and heartrending. Some might even have thought putting in all the avalanche material would hurt their pure writing. But writing is information, and when you walk away from this story you will know about avalanches. You will know the human suffering they can cause, but primarily you will know a lot about avalanches.

As an experiment, take her story apart. Read just the parts about the rescue attempts and leave out all the background information about avalanches. The story moves by quickly, but lacks depth. Now do the opposite. Just read the background material about the avalanches. Pretty dry stuff. It lacks drama. Now put the two together as Martin did, and you have drama and information. You have a story that is difficult to put down. The structure demands that you read on to find out what happened to the boys.

You never sense the presence of the writer, but she is there. She times her breaks in the action sequences perfectly, she describes details, she makes scenes come alive, and she has done her research. This story took time. She obviously has read reports and news stories and interviewed tons of people, from experts to rescue crews who got to the scene immediately following the devastating accident.

So much information can swamp a novice, but this is the kind of story most writers can master—probably not the first time, but eventually. Study her style, look for similar stories in magazines and newspapers, and, of course, try them yourself. The more complex these stories become, the more important it is for you to have a good editor or teacher to help you through the morass of information. Incidentally, this story won a first prize in general excellence in feature writing from The American Association of Sunday and Feature Editors. (The original story was longer, but read extremely fast. We condense it here because we are using it primarily as a teaching guide.)

Living In the Danger Zone

By Claire Martin
The Denver Post

At about 20 minutes past 11 on a warm Sunday morning in early February, 6-year-old Taylor Huddleston and his cousins, Erwin Effler, 6, and Michael Effler, 4, were playing in the snow.

Below them, in the driveway of the Mountain Sunrise Condominiums, the Efflers' father, Erwin, was helping load luggage in an airport limousine van as the families got ready to leave Mount Crested Butte. They had expected to leave a couple days earlier, on Friday, Feb. 3, but a heavy snowstorm had closed the airport in nearby Gunnison for two days, extending the Efflers' and Huddlestons' skiing vacation.

Kib Crank, the van's driver, glanced at the boys. One was breaking a trail in the waist-deep new snow—34 inches had fallen since Friday—and the other two were following him. Crank had turned his attention back to the luggage when he heard the heavy sound of falling snow.

At first, Crank thought that snow had slid off the condominium's roof. When he looked up, he saw an enormous cloud of snow billowing toward the driveway. Suddenly, snow was moving under his feet. It didn't sink in until the snow cloud began to settle: This was an avalanche.

"We've got kids in there!" Effler yelled. "Michael! Erwin! Taylor!"

The boys were nowhere in sight.

More than 10 feet of snow had buried the driveway. Crank panicked. He didn't know what to do first. He yelled

Notice all the detail in her reconstruction, from where people were standing to who was driving the van. Though she doesn't dwell on it, you'll remember the role fate had in this tragedy.

Of course, she got all this information for the reconstruction after the accident.

Easy to visualize images, like him running to place his hat, stick with readers long after they finish the piece.

at one of the mothers to call 911. He scrambled up on the settling snow and began digging frantically with his hands. Then he remembered something he'd learned from backcountry ski trips: Always mark the last place you saw someone before the avalanche. He ran to the place he thought he'd last seen the three boys, pulled off his hat and put it on the snow.

"The snow probably carried 'em down," said a voice down near his van. People were starting to gather. Many had brought shovels. Some were comforting the boys' parents, who were waiting at the edge of the slide, frightened and teary. Crank, shoveling snow, hardly heard the buzzing voices until one remark caught his attention.

"I looked up there the other day and I said to myself, 'Well, there's an avalanche ready to happen,'" said a man Crank didn't recognize.

"But still, you wouldn't expect that. You wouldn't expect the town to allow someone to build a condo right in an avalanche path."

But that is exactly what happened, and not only in Mount Crested Butte.

In Vail, you can still see the concrete foundation that the developers of the Kings Court complex were forced to abandon: It was sitting directly in front of a large avalanche chute. The Spring Gulch avalanche chute that hangs over Ophir, a suburb of Telluride, has in the past wrecked some homes and nudged others away from their original sites. In 1962, an avalanche rumbling down Mount Elbert killed seven residents of Twin Lakes and crushed mountain cabins as if they were shoe boxes.

There are newer developments—built over the last 20 years, when Colorado earnestly began courting tourists—that many geologists judge to be uncomfortably close to avalanche chutes. Yet developers in Crested Butte and other mountain towns compare the Feb. 5 avalanche at the Mountain Sunrise condominiums to a lightning strike—a wild card, a tragic but unique event, certainly not something that's likely to happen again.

Or could it?

"The thing is, almost any area that has ideal ski terrain and climate has the potential for avalanches—they're kind of a built-in hazard," said Pat Rogers, a geologist for the Colorado Geological Survey.

This quote sets up the whole story . . .

. . . And it is the perfect transition for what the story is really about: developments in avalanche-prone areas.

These two graphs summarize the story's thrust.

The writer talks to many experts. They give the story credibility and help the writer understand her subject.

"When we are asked now to look for hazards in lots of land being considered for developments, we are looking at land that tends to be more potentially troublesome. They're not the big lots we were looking at 10 or 12 years ago. By now, people have chosen the better tracts. Now, all that's left are lots that have been bypassed for various reasons, like being too close to runout zones of avalanche chutes or rock-fall areas."

The Mountain Sunrise condominium complex was built in 1979, one of dozens of similar developments popping up in mountain communities anxious to lure tourists. The resort town of Mount Crested Butte, just 3 miles from the old mining town of Crested Butte, was only 9 years old, but already it was attracting the young, upscale skiers who gladden developers' hearts. . . .

The building where the Huddlestones and the Efflers would spend their 1989 vacation was put on a slope whose incline measures between 30 and 35 degrees. Most avalanches begin on slopes with inclines of 30 to 45 degrees. A geological investigation of the hillside above the Mountain Sunrise condominiums would have included an evaluation of the avalanche hazard potential.

Had the Mountain Sunrise complex been built outside town limits, a 1973 law would have required the developers to do a geological investigation of the property. Whether they would have done it is another question: The law is toothless. If a developer fails to obey it, there is no penalty, according to Colorado State Geology Survey geologist Candace Jochim.

As it happens, the complex lies just within the town limits, and the town of Mount Crested Butte did not require developers to conduct geologic investigations. The zoning code did not even mention avalanches, and still doesn't, according to Bill Racek, the current town planner for Mount Crested Butte.

"Part of the problem is that all those lots were plotted, divided, long before anyone ever really thought about doing any sort of survey with relationship to avalanches," he said.

Another part of the problem is that even though the slope behind the Mountain Sunrise condominiums did fit the profile of a potential avalanche hazard — an incline between 30 and 45 degrees, with a slope bare of trees — it was not a place where large avalanches often occurred.

See how Mountain Sunrise is one example used to prove a larger point.

She had to check with officials or check official documents. It's best to do both.

More research.

The Colorado Avalanche Information Center describes the avalanche danger on that slope as "low intermittent," with several decades lapsing between substantial slides like the one that ran on Feb. 5.

Notice all the varying sources and interviews her information comes from.

"Because of their long return periods, (certain) avalanches are rarely observed, especially in areas that have been inhabited only a few years or decades," Art Mears wrote in the 1979 Colorado Snow-Avalanche Area Studies and Guidelines for Avalanche Hazard Planning.

Mears drove from his Gunnison home to inspect the Mount Crested Butte avalanche the day after it ran, and has returned to study it several times after that.

"Builders avoid where people see snow coming down regularly, where the avalanche hazard is obvious," Mears said.

"The problems arise where there are infrequent avalanches, avalanches where the average return period is a generation—30 years or so. If an avalanche comes down only every 30 years, chances are that people won't have observed that activity. Mount Crested Butte is relatively new, and not many people were up there until the mid-70s."

This coming back to the action sequence is a classical structure of this genre of writing.

The first radio call for help came at about 11:25 A.M. The dispatcher announced that she had received calls reporting children buried by a snow slide at the Mountain Sunrise condominiums. Any available emergency medical technicians were to go to 15 Marcellina Lane.

Again notice the use of details: from the time, 11:25 A.M., to the address, 15 Marcellina Lane.

Dave Siengo, an emergency medical technician and mayor pro tem of Mount Crested Butte, had heard the page. He looked out his window—he lives two blocks from the Mountain Sunrise condominiums—and saw the avalanche. He knew immediately it was more serious than the dispatcher realized.

Reconstructions like this are usually put together using interviews, news stories and official reports. The writer can't stretch the truth or make up details; the reconstruction must come from reliable sources.

By the time he got to the condominiums about two minutes later, a dozen people were already there, and more were arriving. Siengo was shaken at the size of the avalanche. There were slabs of snow 6 feet long, 6 feet wide and 4 feet deep—"slabs the size of Volkswagens" said Mark Helland, one of the rescue workers.

The growing crowd milled on the hardening snow of the avalanche runoff. Most of the people were locals and

tourists. Some clunked around in their ski boots. Many had brought shovels, broomsticks, mop handles, rakes and even skis to use as makeshift avalanche poles. They jabbed them into the snow, searching for the boys' bodies while Erwin and June Effler and Lauren and Rebecca Huddleston waited.

Suddenly, someone found a boot. Then a hat. People rushed over, digging with their hands. They pulled a small body out of the snow. It had been 10 minutes since the avalanche ran.

"We found one!" a woman yelled at Siengo. Someone thrust Michael Effler, limp and gray, at Siengo.

Michael wasn't breathing. Siengo checked for a pulse. He found it. He put his mouth on the child's and forced air into the boy's lungs, a technique known as "rescue breathing," until suddenly the boy began breathing by himself.

By then, they had found Erwin Effler. Like Michael, Erwin had been buried under only about three feet of snow—in fact, he was found only a couple of feet from where his brother had been. Erwin wasn't breathing, either, but he had a pulse, and after another doctor performed rescue breathing, Erwin began to breathe, too.

The medical technicians and the Efflers, dizzy with relief, took the Effler boys inside to strip off their wet clothes, warm up and make sure they weren't hurt.

The Huddlestons stayed outside, tense and fearful. They stared at the broken snow gleaming under the warm sun. The volunteers prodded the settling chunks with a confidence that began dissolving as minutes passed—no more small boots or hats turned up.

Where was Taylor?

There are two kinds of avalanches. The one that trapped Taylor Huddleston was a slab avalanche. Slab avalanches are enormous blocks of snow that shatter almost as soon as they separate from the slope, raising clouds of fine snow. Powder avalanches form from dry, loose snow that gathers density and momentum—up to 200 miles an hour—as the avalanche runs.

What created this particular slab avalanche was a combination of conditions: a heavy storm that dumped 40 inches of snow in less than 48 hours; high winds that blew more snow on top of the load already burdening the lee

She writes in the past tense. Often these reconstructions are done in the present tense to give them even more immediacy.

There is no leaving this story.

Remember this is a story about avalanches.

side of a steep hill; and a warm morning that made the new snow too heavy for the slope to bear.

Before the avalanche ran, a cornice—a lip of snow that the wind sculpted at the crest of the hill—had formed. The fracture line, where the slab broke off, is just below the cornice.

When the slab fractured, there was nothing to stop it but a fence that marks the boundary between the town of Mount Crested Butte and Gunnison County. The slope is utterly treeless. In the summer, cattle graze on the county side of the fence.

Avalanche expert Don Bachman measured the fracture later. It was 165 feet wide, and fell about 300 vertical feet to the Mountain Sunrise driveway, carrying about 500 cubic meters of snow. A small avalanche, by Bachman's standards. He considers a large avalanche to be like the one in Telluride that fell 2,000 vertical feet a few weeks after the Mount Crested Butte slide. Even a small avalanche can be deadly, though. As an avalanche advances, it accelerates and creates a dense core that picks up more snow as the avalanche gathers speed. A really fast-moving avalanche can become airborne, sailing over the snow at up to 200 miles per hour.

When an avalanche hits you, even at 10 miles per hour, it can strike as hard as a car, enveloping you in coalescing snow that can exert hundreds of pounds of pressure per square inch. Compressing snow closes around you, pushing against your chest. As it settles, it presses harder and harder, until you cannot breathe at all.

"It's similar to having wet cement poured on you," said Tom Mason, a physician at St. Mary's Hospital in Grand Junction, who has treated several avalanche victims.

"The snow is so crushing that people don't have the ability to expand their chests. They die of asphyxiation."

When Michael Helland, the assistant fire marshal for the Crested Butte Fire Protection District, heard the first radio call for help—the call Siengo had listened to—he thought it sounded as if they could use some extra help. He threw some shovels—the only avalanche equipment the fire district then owned—in the van and headed for Marcellina Lane, at the west edge of Mount Crested Butte.

Helland organized the chaotic crowd into an avalanche

Accidents like this generate reams of official reports which are usually open to the public. The writer must select those that are relevant. This story is about the dangers of overbuilding in avalanche country. Most of her details adhere to that point.

The car is a frame of reference to put the avalanche's force into terms you can understand.

People read for information and in this story they aren't cheated.

Short but poignant quote.

Notice how paragraph above eases you back to the drama again.

probe line. A probe line is a single, slow-moving line of people with avalanche probes—ideally, slender poles 12 feet long—followed by a second group of shovelers who dig at spots flagged by probers who suspect they've struck something unusual.

Helland's probe line with its makeshift probe poles swept the avalanche run twice. A few people thought they'd hit something, but the diggers found nothing but hardening snow. The impromptu probes couldn't strike down much more than 4 feet. When the ski patrol arrived from the Mount Crested Butte Ski Resort, carrying genuine avalanche probe poles 12 feet long, Helland gladly turned things over to them.

The ski patrol formed a practiced probe line, and slowly started over the runout. The snow was pitted where diggers had already searched. The ski patrol's probe line went over the runout once without finding anything. Then it went over the snow again, probing more deeply. This time, about 30 feet from where the Effler boys had been found, one of the patrol members found something.

A few minutes later, they uncovered Taylor Huddleston. He was unconscious. He was not breathing, and his heart had stopped. He had been buried for almost an hour under 10 feet of heavy, dense snow.

Both probe lines had passed over Taylor three times before he was found.

Usually, when people think of avalanches, they picture Colorado's backcountry, where plenty of avalanches happen. Last month's avalanche at Mount Crested Butte was one of 250 reported in Colorado's south and central mountains that weekend. Most of those were in the backcountry, but avalanches have hit towns, too.

In 1962, the small village of Twin Lakes, near Leadville, was hit by an avalanche that came crashing down from Mount Elbert. Seven people were killed. Some were in bed when the avalanche barged into their houses. Cabins were shattered. There are photographs of snow-filled kitchens and living rooms, of snowy mattresses with snow-glazed dolls lying on them, of pine trees snapped like asparagus.

For a while, people quit building their cabins in that part of town. Periodically the Colorado Geological Survey is asked to approve a proposal for a development on the

Back to information mode. This is the kind of statistic that shows depth of reporting.

Obviously she studied the photographs. Use any medium that will help in your research from still photos to videotape to written reports.

site of the avalanche. The state rejects such proposals out of hand. A few years ago, a developer promised geologist Rogers that his proposed Twin Lakes cabins would be for summer occupation only. Rogers turned down that one, too.

Historical information puts recent tragedies into perspective.

In Ophir, a small town of about 30 just south of Telluride, residents have adapted their winter lives to accommodate the avalanches that routinely close the road between Ophir and Telluride. Until recently, when Ophir adopted an avalanche-control policy that involves triggering small avalanches to save the town from large ones, avalanches often tore into town.

"There's houses in Ophir that have been moved from where they were built to where they are now by snow and mud slides," said Dave Katz who, like most Ophir residents, commutes to a job in Telluride. His house sits just inside the Spring Gulch boundary line charted by the U.S. Geological Survey.

"Everyone here is very avalanche-aware," Katz said.

"Some people, before they leave Telluride, will call home and say, come get me if I don't get there by such-and-such a time. I know a ski patrolman who carries an avalanche transmitter with him in the winter. You carry a shovel and blankets in your car in the winter—although if one of the big avalanches hit you in your car, a blanket wouldn't really do much good. A transmitter might help 'em find your body faster, though." . . .

This last sentence makes this quote work.

When Taylor Huddleston was pulled out of the snow, Siengo looked at him and his heart sank.

"He had all the signs of death," Siengo said later.

"His skin was pale. It had a gray pallor. He wasn't breathing, nor was his heart beating. And the fact that he was under the snow for such a long time—well, in some hypothermia cases, people survive because their system slows down, but they can breathe. He'd been buried so deep, there was no way he could have been able to breathe. Without oxygen, you're clinically dead in four to six minutes, and after that, the brain begins to die. We managed to get his heart beating—hearts are incredible; they don't die for a long time after a person is clinically dead—but he never did breathe on his own."

An ambulance took Taylor to Dr. Dan Tullius at the

GETTING THE STORY DOWN ON PAPER

Crested Butte Medical Center, just down the road. Medical technicians were pushing air into Taylor's lungs, but they hadn't managed to persuade his heart to start beating. Tullius performed cardiopulmonary resuscitation on Taylor for 45 minutes with no success. He was about to give up and declare Taylor dead when Taylor's heart feebly began to beat.

Tullius called Joanie Dahlen, the Flight For Life nurse on duty at St. Mary's Hospital in Grand Junction. Dahlen had already been notified to stand by. Tullius told her to come get Taylor.

The Flight For Life helicopter landed at the ski-resort parking lot at 2:30 and flew Taylor out immediately. The Huddlestone's followed in a plane chartered by Mountain Sunrise manager Paul Hird and Crested Butte Mountain Resort co-owner Ralph Walton, a longtime friend of the Huddlestone's.

Taylor never began breathing independently, though. His eyes remained dilated and unfocused, an indication of brain-stem damage due to lack of oxygen. An examination found that he had internal bleeding.

At 10:11 P.M. that night, about 11 hours after the avalanche snatched him, Taylor Huddlestone quietly died.

The story continues on from here, but by now you should have an idea of how to weave dramatic material with drier factual material. Taylor's death also shows the talk about zoning and avalanches is more than just an obtuse governmental issue.

