

CHAPTER FOUR

Elevating Mundane Writing to the Sublime

Too many news stories are filled with talking heads. By that, Jack Hart of the *Oregonian* in Eugene, Oregon, means people are simply quoted without us learning any more about them. In straight news stories, that's fine. Often all we want are the facts, nothing more. But in features, and especially in profiles, the readers want more. Hart compares it with writing novels. In great fiction you have more than just people talking. You have characters being developed. The same is true in literary nonfiction and should be true in writing profiles.

Writing Profiles Means Going Beyond Talking Heads

Jack Hart

If we wanted to spend our time reading résumés, we'd all be personnel managers.

And yet, the conventional newspaper profile all too often consists of nothing more than a tedious recounting of biographical facts. "He was born near Linton," writes our profiler, "and attended high school in Corona."

Such profiles usually go beyond the list of basic job application stats, of course. They add the personnel office's screening interview,

too. The nervous job applicant stands before the reader as quote after quote rolls out, each purely informational, each devoid of color or character, and each largely unrelated to the others. "I'm responsible for all shipping orders," says our applicant. "And I also like to jog."

Thus the personnel-office profile takes shape. A lead that identifies the subject. General biographical background with no particular focus. Then the chain of quotes, each joined to the next with a brief transition.

Such stories do justice to the word "profile" only in the first and second dictionary sense of the term—"a side view" or "an outline." They're holdovers from the antiquated view of the journalist as nothing more than a collector of bald facts, a recording device with no responsibility to serve readers by placing information in a meaningful context. They have nothing to do with what *Webster's New World* gives as a third definition of the profile—"a short, vivid biographical and character sketch."

Contrast the personnel-office approach with the form exploited by master profiler Gay Talese, whose more memorable character sketches were gathered in the 1970 anthology, *Fame and Obscurity* (reprinted in 1981 as a Dell paperback). When Talese tackles the likes of Frank Sinatra or Joe Louis, the subject lives on the page, breathing personality with all the intensity of a character by Larry McMurtry. When Talese finishes with his subject, the side view bores through the center of the subject, and the outline is fleshed out with human emotion, motivation and character. The resulting portrait meets the fundamental standard of success in profile writing: It explains why this particular human being ended up in this place, at this time, doing this thing.

Such a profile presents a theory of personality that persuades the reader through a careful recitation of evidence. In the end, it leaves the reader with new insight that goes far beyond bare biographical background and random utterances. It gives the why of a human being in a way that helps the reader understand the course of an individual life. A good profile leaves the reader confident that he could predict how the subject would act in a situation as yet un-lived.

The key to that kind of profile lies in the tricks of characterization developed in 250 years of writing the novel. They work equally well whether the subject is a product of life or of imagination, and Talese uses them profusely to explore the truths of human behavior

that often surface in the novel and remain hidden in the newspaper. Most of them show up in "Mr. Bad News," a classic profile of former *New York Times* obituary writer Alden Whitman. To construct his Whitman profile, which appears in *Fame and Obscurity*, Talese relied on a narrative line, vignettes and anecdotes, physical description and telling details.

A Narrative Line

A narrative line gives a novel its plot, but also serves as a vehicle for furthering characterization. Talese begins his portrait of Whitman as the obituary writer slips out of bed in the morning. The specifics of Whitman's early-morning habits tell more about his character than a volume of abstract observations. Talese could have described his subject as calm and measured. Instead, he revealed him as a morning tea-drinker and pipe-smoker.

Talese then followed Whitman through his morning routine, his daily commute to the *Times*, and his work in the newsroom, thereby pursuing a "day-in-the-life" action line common to newspaper and magazine profiles. The approach fits neatly into the limited space available for most newspaper profiles, but it allows readers a glimpse of the subject in a variety of personal and professional situations.

Still other narrative schemes can fit an expansive portrait into a tight frame. "The journalistic visit" takes the reader along on a trip to the subject's home or workplace. The extended anecdote breaks away from a revealing episode in the subject's life to slip in background and then returns to continue the action. Just about any story line with a beginning, a middle and an end will do:

His real teeth, all thirty-two of them, were knocked out or loosened by three strong-arm men in an alley one night in 1936 in Alden Whitman's hometown, Bridgeport, Connecticut. He was twenty-three years old then, a year out of Harvard and full of verve, and his assailants apparently opposed opinions supported by Whitman. He bears no ill will toward those who attacked him, conceding they had their point of view, nor is he at all sentimental about his missing teeth. They were full of cavities, he says, a blessing to be rid of them.

As it develops character, a narrative line adds yet another element missing from all too many newspaper profiles—it adds the

dramatic tension of a true story and makes readers eager to see how the episode comes out.

Vignettes and Anecdotes

"Mr. Bad News" contains more than a dozen anecdotes and at least that many vignettes. Each entertains in its own right, but each also reveals something of the theory Talese developed to explain Whitman's talent as an obituary writer. The subject emerges from the barrage of entertaining yarns as a fastidious, unflappable man, his "magpie mind" crammed with useful trivia. He has the romantic streak needed to appreciate the accomplishments of great artists and statesmen, the obsession with routine needed to love a sedentary assignment, and the passion for accuracy appropriate to the *New York Times*.

The tight focus displayed in Talese's anecdotes highlights two more attributes of the winning profile.

First, a short character sketch cannot hope to explain the complexities of an entire human being. So the successful profile writer concentrates on the one or two personality traits that seem central to the subject's newsworthy accomplishment. Virtually all of Talese's anecdotes relate to Whitman's personality and its contribution to his virtuosity as an obituary writer.

Second, Talese obviously culled the anecdotes he actually used from a much larger number. Focus grows out of careful selection, and anecdotes so perfectly focused suggest especially ruthless selection. And that, in turn, drives home the point that thorough, extensive reporting is an absolute requirement for each good profile. A quick interview and a couple of phone calls just won't yield the raw material needed for the sifting, winnowing and funneling that produce a controlled personality portrait.

Physical Description

By the time Talese wrote three lines of "Mr. Bad News" he'd launched an anecdote and told readers that Whitman is short, wears horn-rimmed glasses, and smokes a pipe. Other telling details follow within a page. Whitman has a full head of brown hair and a full bridge of false teeth. His face is round and his habitual expression is serious. He has surprisingly small blue eyes and a thick, reddish mustache.

An involved reader visualizes the profile subject acting out the ac-

tion line as it unfolds. A few carefully chosen visual details allow readers to construct their own images. The photo that runs with the copy won't create that kind of active involvement, and the only details necessary to create an image are the three or four that set the subject apart from other human beings. Yet many newspaper profiles contain only mundane physical details of the sort shared by half the human race. Surprisingly often, they contain no physical description at all.

Telling Details

Alden Whitman owns two or three suits and wears a bow tie. He subscribes to the *New Statesman*, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, and "nearly every journal in the out-of-town newsstand in Times Square." He's seen *Casablanca* three dozen times.

Of such pieces human beings are made. The details are concrete, tangible attributes that readers recognize as signs of a particular style. They involve readers accustomed to reaching their own conclusions about other people on the basis of visible bits of information. They're the most persuasive possible evidence for a theory of personality because they make the case by showing, rather than telling.

But the temptation always is to tell. Too many profile writers draw their own conclusions—the subject is aggressive, diffident or cynical—and pass them along without substantiation. They risk not only the reader's willingness to believe, but his interest as well.

Tom Wolfe cites the special importance of a particular kind of telling detail, which he calls the status indicator. One of the main reasons we read (and why we read profiles in particular) is to gauge our place in the social fabric. What image do we project through our choices of possessions—clothing, furniture, automobiles and the like—and what does that say about our essential character? Observant profile writers focus on objects that are telling because they carry a status code shared by readers. Only a man of a certain stripe wears a bow tie and smokes a pipe.

The list hardly exhausts Talese's repertoire of literary devices. He unifies "Mr. Bad News" by weaving death metaphors throughout its narrative fabric. He maintains the narrative line by slipping in background with the techniques of exposition refined by short story writers. He begins his profile with a bit of dialogue that reveals character while generating a vignette.

In the end, we leave a familiar Alden Whitman leaning over his

 ELEVATING MUNDANE WRITING TO SUBLIME

typewriter in the *Times* newsroom. We know something of his history and his style. We've seen him at work, on the subway, at a dinner party, and in his bedroom. We understand why he relishes a job that most reporters would shun.

With fewer than 5,000 words, Talese has defined the perfect obituary writer at a level of insight that goes far beyond the most detailed job description. No résumé, no battery of psychological tests, could reveal more about a potential employee.

In the final analysis, it seems talented profile writers have something in common with the best personnel managers. They buttress the biographical facts with insight and keen observation. They make their decisions by sifting through a broad array of often subtle clues to personality. And if they spotted another Alden Whitman standing in a line of applicants for an obituary writer's job, they'd hire him on the spot.

Jack Hart is the *Oregonian's* staff development director and writing coach. Before taking his present job, he served as a general assignment reporter and as the editor of the paper's Sunday magazine, *Northwest*. He earned a B.A. in journalism from the University of Washington and a Ph.D. in mass communication from the University of Wisconsin. He has been a member of the journalism faculties at the University of Oregon and various other universities. He is a member of the Poynter Institute's visiting faculty and conducts writing workshops throughout the United States.

Often the novice will ask: Why write description? After all, the story is more than likely going to have photographs. But often the photos just show what someone or something looks like. Written description can do that, but should also do much more. It should make connections between what we see and the theme of the story. Using active words like Kim Ode does in the last paragraph of this next essay not only tells how someplace looks, it also shows us how it feels to be there. Throughout the following essay on description, writer Bob Ehlert reminds us to make those connections and also that if we are going to describe that gun above the mantel, we had better well use it.

Using Description Effectively

Bob Ehlert

Several years ago photographer Marlin Levison and I decided to go on an impromptu feature story roundup in a remote area of Minne-

sota that the locals call the North Shore. We wanted to see who was holed up from life in this region that borders the northwest shore of Lake Superior, a place where a few thousand folks have the run of millions of acres.

Sure, it is peaceful and pretty up there. Tourists come from all over the Upper Midwest to hunt and fish and play along the North Shore in summer. All but the hardest Shore dwellers leave when winter settles in along Cook and Lake counties.

What we wanted to know is what kind of folks were living there with the black flies and the black bears, at the ends of dirt roads through cabin fever cold spells, downshore from the Split Rock Lighthouse and along the inlets of the big lake they call "Gichegume."

You get the picture: a dream assignment in a beautiful place. There was no deadline. No agenda. No preprinted text from a speech to fall back upon. It was like a free fall with nobody but the editor watching.

In Search of a Theme

After spending two weeks in the wilds up there, my mind, and more importantly my notebook, came back full of facts and tastes and smells and feelings.

I spent my first night on the Shore, for instance, in a roadside inn where there was a fire blazing in a great room that afforded a wonderful view of the lake. There, on a cool June night in the city of Two Harbors, I stayed up well past sunset reading about Lake Superior shipwrecks, geology and lore. That's because I believe every story needs a tone or a kind of theme.

I took notes about the unrelenting tides crashing on the rocky shores, about the wreck of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*, which left Two Harbors bound for the East in November of 1975.

Never to return.

I believe in getting steeped in what's around you.

Just as a news reporter takes notes about what goes on at a city council meeting or a fire, feature writers ought to be taking even more notes. That's because their job goes beyond the objective facts about what happened. They should also record what happened between the lines. I call that subjective reporting.

From that kind of mood research I fashioned one of the opening

paragraphs about the lake which, by then, seemed like a friendly legend:

“Ever so slowly, Superior carves out coves and caves. She transforms cliffs and stout formations into pebble beaches. She goes where she wants and she takes what she will from the land and its people, the North Shore people.”

Using the magical powers of a little description, the feature writer can take the reader along to the North Shore, the city council meeting—whatever it is—and make him feel as though he was there.

Since that was my goal on the North Shore trip, that’s why I dug in and tried to learn the history and lore of the place—all the while taking notes. Sometimes I scribbled by hand and sometimes I dictated into a tape recorder.

Beyond my empirical observations I did things like taste the water or react to the cool temperature of the streams that fed it. I took notes of the bird, the wildlife and foliage.

Such research netted paragraphs such as this one, which is included in a section about hiking along a series of waterfalls:

Suddenly there is a sensation of walking through, or acting out a daydream on the trail. A daydream whose setting of swirling pools, rushing eddies, seagulls, robins, woodpeckers and silver birch forests is all so real.

I was convinced that I was in a very special place discovering it for others, perhaps for the first time, or rediscovering and defining it for those who had grown too familiar with it. All of this—call it data or whatever you like—became the bank from which I made withdrawals later when I wanted to describe things.

The First Draft

But what do you describe? When do you describe? And why do you describe in the first place?

I think we should describe anything out of the ordinary when we sit down to write a first draft. Subsequent editing will reveal what works best.

When we choose to describe depends upon how important the person or thing being described is to the story. In fiction writing, or general story telling, there is an old maxim that goes like this: Never describe the gun above the mantel unless you’re going to use it. In

other words, don't describe people or things that won't play into the theme of your story.

Once, when I was writing a profile of a former Minneapolis police chief, I wrote that the lines in his forehead went up and down like the slats in Venetian blinds.

I set that image up early in the story because I knew, later on, I was going to dramatize his reaction to a difficult question I had asked. When he gave his less-than-honest answer, the lines in his forehead seemed to go down—just like the blinds that are pulled when people want their privacy.

The answer to the question of why you describe is the simplest of all for me. I describe because it is fun. It is writing. Description breathes life into the copy. It is the reason I am a feature writer rather than a hard news writer.

In hard news, space is often at a premium. The facts are stacked at the top and, as a matter of course, often lopped from the bottom. Feature stories are more like a canvas. The space is still defined, but you can choose the colors and tones and shadings you like. However, just as you can't paint from an empty palette, you can't describe things out of thin air. When I talked to people on my North Shore sojourn, I listened to what they said and how they said it. I recorded where they said it. When they said it. And, perhaps most importantly, why they said it.

Writers should never be passive tourists. They should always be actively engaged in life, describing how it looked and felt when they were there so they can recount it when they write.

After gathering a mass of objective facts and subjective impressions, a writer is ready to describe what it is he or she has experienced. Sometimes the descriptions themselves come almost word for word from recorded observations.

While watching an old commercial fisherman get his boat positioned at his dock, Levison, my photographer companion on the North Shore trip, noted that it was just like a farmer bringing his cow home. Here's how that apt observation got into my story:

And each night, Ragnvald Sve walks out on his water-worn pier to fetch his boat again. While the gulls watch from the rocky island just offshore, the old fisherman talks to the Viking (his boat) and leads it around with a rope as if it were an old cow.

The North Shore feature story excursion was a wonderful trip.

ELEVATING MUNDANE WRITING TO SUBLIME

I filled up my notebooks and cassette tapes with hundreds of observations. And when it came time to write, I was not only ready to describe things, I was anxious.

One of my favorite bits of descriptive writing came in the introduction of a story about a man and his daughter. He had "rescued" her from an ugly custody battle and now was raising her in a very liberal fashion. He was her teacher, her friend, her parent.

Home was a sorry-looking place in a miniature junkyard of art and decaying wood. They lived off the main road of the North Shore and far from the mainstream of a normal life. After talking to the man and his daughter and recalling the dilapidated structures in the area and the ramshackle nature of his own house, I made this connection between him and those deteriorating buildings:

He has a face like an abandoned house. His eyes are deep-set and empty like dark rooms on the second floor. His teeth are here and there like boarded up and broken windows . . .

There was plenty more where that came from on the North Shore. There is plenty more wherever a keen observer travels. As writers, our job is to take mental pictures and literal notes—the results of which can make for wonderful description.

This last bit of description comes from Kim Ode, a feature writer at the *Star Tribune* in Minneapolis who, obviously, has come to know the Badlands in South Dakota:

The sun drops like a coin into a slot on the horizon, triggering a jukebox of coyotes. The full moon rises so huge and fast, you unconsciously brace yourself against the rotation of the Earth. Stars burst into view. You wouldn't be anywhere else. There is nowhere else.

Bob Ehlert is a staff writer on the *Star Tribune's* Sunday magazine. In 1989 he was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in feature writing. He has won several other state and regional awards for his writing. He came to the *Star Tribune* from *The Virginian-Pilot* and *The Ledger-Star* newspapers in Norfolk, Virginia, where he was a feature writer and arts and entertainment editor.

Mark Patinkin is a columnist who makes his living by writing in the first person. Most of us will only do the occasional first-person piece. For it to work, it will have to be about an unusual experience or an experience so common that many readers can empathize with it. The more perceptive you are, the stronger your writing will be. Occasionally in a first-person piece you can get away without doing re-

search, but as with all writing, the more information and knowledge you bring to it, the richer it will be. One further thing: Few writers find immediate success by writing first-person pieces. Usually they learn the fundamentals of writing and reporting and then come to first-person writing with all their skills fully polished.

Writing in the First Person

Mark Patinkin

I'd just returned home from a two-month assignment writing about religious violence in Belfast, India, and Beirut. I was at a local restaurant, handing my VISA card to the waitress. She paused when she saw the name.

"Are you the Mark Patinkin who writes for the paypa?" she said.

In Rhode Island, my home state, that's how "paper" is pronounced. She was referring to my column, which I'd been writing four times a week for the Providence *Journal-Bulletin* for several years.

I told her I was. As someone who often writes about light, personal subjects, I was proud to be recognized after just completing a lengthy series on the world's war zones. At the time, mid-1986, I'd been the only American journalist to make it to the Moslem side of Beirut in months. I waited for the waitress to say something about my accounts of sneaking across the Green Line, of Sikh-Hindu violence in India, of Catholic-Protestant hatred in Northern Ireland.

Instead, she said this:

"I really like your stories about how you and your brothas used to eat red licorice for breakfast and stuff."

Brothas is Rhode Island for brothers.

And her comment showed one of the burdens of being a first-person journalist.

No matter how often you strive for substance, readers will remember you not for your insights on the drug problem, or the Warsaw Pact, but for the time you had a babysitter crisis, about your admission that you now have to ask your wife what you like to eat at restaurants, about being so "houseblind" you no longer see the piles of clutter around your living room.

