

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

