Introduction

This section will develop students’ skills in the craft of feature writing, one of the media’s perennial genres. Feature writing is the most diverse of all journalistic styles. Many journalists enjoy this form of writing because of the scope afforded to them in choosing a topic and devising language and structure. Many kinds of features are possible, up to and including pieces that could be classed as ‘literary’. Despite the many varieties of feature story, it is possible to identify common elements that make up a beautifully crafted piece. While journalists have more freedom of expression in feature writing than they do in news writing, there is no open invitation to undisciplined writing. Part of the allure of features for the reader is being taken along for an exciting ride by a confident and skilled writer. The reader might not know where you are going, but hopefully they will trust you to get them there safely.

Feature writing complements the news

Features give depth, width, colour, gloss, sass, savvy, mind, heart and pathos to the media. They can give readers access to a level of understanding about a topic that cannot be achieved in the news format. They add to the media’s fourth estate function by finding, uncovering and elucidating hitherto obscured or disregarded information. They are a means to illuminate the variety of human life and put into context society’s structures, reforms, successes and failures. They complement and extend the news, and are an indispensable part of public information as well as a great source of enjoyment for readers.

According to Ricketson (2004:4): ‘A first-rate feature can add almost as much to a newspaper as a breaking news story.’

As a general rule, there are several main kinds of features, although be aware that these categories have a tendency to overlap:

- news features, which flesh out a topic currently in the news
- investigative features, which uncover secrets and lies
- profiles, which focus on the lives of individuals
- human interest stories, which may be heartrending, gossipy or humorous
- special interest features, such as historical pieces, travelogues or how-to guides.
Pick up a broadsheet newspaper such as *The Weekend Australian*, and see if you can identify all of these kinds, and more. Hint: look into the ‘Inquirer’ section for news and investigative features or the colour magazine for profiles. Note how news features are almost always connected in some way to what appears in the first part of the paper, while other kinds of features may not be.

**Formulas of structure and language: four elements**

Once journalism students move on from the news story to learning how to write features, they sometimes get alarmed and confused that the strict forms of print news seem to be dispensed with and anything goes. That is not strictly true, as features have a discipline about them too, but it is different from the disciplines of news. Versatility is a useful characteristic among journalists, so it is wise to cultivate the ability to flip between the different styles, as you may find yourself doing both news and features in your professional life.

News stories are almost always shorter than features, although supplying a blunt statement of relative word counts is tricky—there is too much variation. Mainstream news stories rarely exceed 700 words, and most are much shorter. Features cover a broad range, usually (in Australia) from around 800 words up to no more than about 3000 words. The standout exception is the famous literary magazine *The New Yorker*, which has been known to run features of up to 35,000 words.

Another distinguishing characteristic is structure. As a house frame holds together the roof and walls, so the structural elements of a feature story provide a clear framework for the writer to build upon. Dunlevy (1988) identified four structural elements: anecdotes, statements of theme, quotes and facts. Dunlevy’s formula is useful, though not absolute:

- Start with an anecdote
- Follow with a statement of theme
- Introduce a quote or fact
- Follow with another anecdote
- Thereafter juxtapose these four elements.

A structure such as this provides a rhythm to your piece, and is a helpful starting point. Experienced writers take pleasure in subverting the formula, but will do so in a knowing way.

**Anecdotes**

Anecdotes are simple stories that illustrate a point. In the feature story, they usually only take up a paragraph or so. Don’t string them out too long, or they will become shaggy dog stories.

**How to make anecdotes:**

- Compose a simple story based on your interview or interviews and/or research
- Use concrete imagery
Pay attention to detail and character description
Stay in one time and place
Include short quotes and facts if possible.

The following example of an anecdote would make a suitable intro to a story about World War II:

Bill Simpson married his childhood sweetheart Maggie in the stone chapel on the hill outside Sunnydale on 18 September 1939. One hundred guests filled the cricket club hall for the reception, including his best mate Rowley Jones. Two days later both men waved their loved ones goodbye as they sailed out of the harbour on the troop ship to Cairo.

In anecdotes, things happen to people, or people make things happen. They can be encapsulated in a few words up to a few paragraphs. Here are a few typical examples of the kinds of action that can be conveyed using an anecdote:

- The accused sat motionless.
- A single shot cut the dawn air, echoing through the still wetlands, striking the bird in full flight. The creature shuddered and fell, hitting the water with a thud. It struggled to spread its wings to recover the life it was about to lose.
- As the corpse went past, the flies left the restaurant table in a cloud and rushed after it, but they came back a few minutes later. The little crowd of mourners—all men and boys, no women—threaded their way across the marketplace between the piles of pomegranates and the taxis and the camels, wailing a short chant over and over again.
- When the first settlers arrived in Melbourne in 1835 they wasted no time in opening a pub.

Anecdotes are a distinctive element in feature writing. They are one of the ways we make the transition from reporting mode to creative mode. To master the art of writing anecdotes is to be well on the way to producing great feature stories. Listen intently during your interviews, and follow up when you hear a good descriptive story developing.

**Statements of theme**

**Statements of theme** are summary sentences to remind the reader of the main idea of the feature, its reason for being. They tie together the article and maintain a narrow focus. They occur every now and then throughout the article, and each one represents an angle on the central theme.

The statement of theme:

- summarises the main idea in the story
- keeps the writer on a narrow course
- reminds the reader of the main idea of the story.
The following sentences could work as statements of theme in a feature story:

- University life is a hand-to-mouth existence.
- The destruction of Australian forests outranks that of any other country.
- In the real estate industry, every time is a good time to buy and sell.
- Working on the docks was more than just a job to the wharfies; it was a way of life.
- He is a predator, sinister, deadly, cruising the lonely highways of the Northern Territory seeking a victim.

Your feature will make a statement of theme somehow and somewhere. It can be bald and bold or it can be subtle, but you must let your readers know what you are on about. It doesn’t have to be the first thing you write—that can be an anecdote if that works for you—but it does need to appear at some point. Not placing a statement of theme might disorientate your readers.

Quotes

It may not exactly have eternal life, but a media quote is not as ephemeral as most human utterances. A quote is a statement attributed to someone. A direct quote is a statement in quotation marks. An indirect quote has no quotation marks but includes an attribution anyway. Anything important enough to be enshrined in print deserves the writer’s full attention, and must earn its place in a feature story. We obtain quotes from the people we interview, the primary sources, or from secondary sources, such as published material (see Tools 1). Quotes can be direct or indirect. Either way, we need to attribute them.

Quotes validate and attribute the ideas in the article. They provide rhythm, authenticity and an avenue for commentary and judgment. They enable the writer to indirectly reveal an argument. In condensing a direct quote, be careful to maintain the essential words and meanings, to avoid misquoting. If the direct quote needs severe pruning, turn it into an indirect quote. Both must reflect the source’s actual words and ideas, but the indirect quote gives slightly more freedom to rephrase for the benefit of clarity and force.

Tips for attribution include:

- Choose quotes carefully, mindful of their need to advance the story and add life and colour
- Keep them short and pithy: no large slabs of verbatim transcript
- Avoid them in the lead
- Consider them as a device to close the story if you have an especially pungent quote
- In direct quotes, put the attribution last
- In indirect quotes, the attribution may appear first or last
- Edit quotes for grammar if necessary.

As with all writing devices, we should not dismiss the possibility of using quotes in unconventional ways, but rarely do they provide the concrete imagery necessary for a successful intro.
Occasionally, however, the words of the interviewee are more powerful than anything the writer could devise. If that is the case, then feel free to deviate from the standard structure.

**Facts and figures**

Your writing will benefit from a variety of facts and figures, which are a sign of research and which will give your work solidity. Wafty, unresearched writing is ultimately unsatisfying. Consider the following statements:

- The new stadium holds 65,000 spectators. (fact)
- The new stadium is the largest in the southern hemisphere. (fact)
- The new stadium towers over the city skyline like a monstrous black cloud. (simile)
- The new stadium inspires spectators by its sheer size. (comment)
- Thirty years ago the Beachside Surfboard Company listed on the Stock Exchange. (fact)
- The decades have passed slowly for the directors of the Beachside Surfboard Company since it first listed on the Australian Stock Exchange. (Comment)

Notice that the comment is also true. Everything in a feature story has to be true: that is, not false—but the way the writer expresses the information establishes its status as the device of fact or as one of the other elements.

Facts alone are rarely engaging. Some people call them factoids to disparage them, and certainly if they are used in a dull way they will in fact be dull. But they can be used to great effect by a skilled writer.

For example, a story about the brown coal industry might include facts such as the number of open cut pits in a region, the age of the pits, the number of employees in the mining industry, the number of occupational health and safety incidents, profits of the coal companies and data about greenhouse emissions.

Here are some tips on the use of facts:

1. Pepper the article lightly with facts and figures
2. Avoid bunching up too many facts in one paragraph
3. Obtain facts from published sources, such as government reports or reference books
4. Always check for accuracy.

**Blending the four elements**

The four structural elements of a feature story complement each other. In the story ‘Hannibal in Town’, the basic structural elements we have discussed so far hang together to tell the story. See how the opening anecdote creates a concrete image in simple narrative form. The fact gives authenticity and anchors the central idea, thus reinforcing the theme. The statement of theme is a reminder of the purpose of the article.
Hannibal in Town

Three limousine drivers came wearing suits. (anecdote)

About 30 people turned up to this session of Hannibal, the much-hyped sequel to Silence of the Lambs, on the first day of public screening. (fact)

You could sense the anticipation. Horror still sells. (statement of theme)

John Harrison, 37, said he was disappointed by the film. (indirect quote)

‘There was no real suspense. I like being scared, but there’s a difference between that and being grossed out,’ he said. (direct quote)

(Source: The Age)

Show-don’t-tell principle:
it the advice given to all media writers to use interesting material to illustrate a point rather than bluntly state something you want the reader to know.

Show-don’t-tell

The show-don’t-tell principle means that in your story you should show, not tell: that is, use interesting material to illustrate a point rather than just bluntly state something you want the reader to know. For instance, in a profile, instead of just writing the bland fact ‘Johanna Bloggs is great with children’, describe a scene where Johanna is interacting with children. Then the reader can draw his or her own conclusion about how the profiled person relates to children.

The anecdote is often the means by which you apply the show-don’t-tell principle. As a rough guide:

- Statements of theme are usually in the telling mode
- Anecdotes are in the showing mode.

Dunlevy (1988:57) expresses this as a distinction between scene and summary. Taking Dunlevy’s approach, we can describe scene as the dramatic depiction of an event. Summary, on the other hand, is a detached explanation of the same event.

A story told in scene rather than summary will be more visual and more powerful.

The joy of discipline

Not every sentence in your feature story will fit neatly into one of the four elements we have been looking at. One of the joys of feature writing is that there is more room to deviate from prescriptive forms such as news writing. But you must understand the notions of structure before you start mucking about with them. Undisciplined writing might be fun for the writer, but it is not much fun for the reader. You have a duty to your readers to perform a service for them, and part of that is the unspoken, unwritten agreement that you will take them
on a journey that they can really enjoy and not feel confused or alienated by. So, keeping in mind your need to consider your reader, you can consider elaborating the basic structure in various ways:

- When the basic elements are in place, you can build on them with passages of description and exposition.
- Beware of extending the passages in telling mode, as there is a danger the feature story will then resemble an essay, an instruction pamphlet or an excerpt from an encyclopedia.
- Return always to the basic elements, using description and exposition to occasionally fill in the gaps and provide background information.

The language of feature writing

Features are great vehicles for fine writing. You are aiming for grace, economy, correctness and style, as in all your media writing. You can add compelling narrative and literary merit too, if you want to and your editor agrees.

Tips to achieve forceful prose include (see Chapter 4 and Tools 2):

- Write in the active voice where possible. Use passive voice sparingly.
- Use concrete rather than abstract words and images.
- Edit every sentence for brevity and conciseness.
- Minimise adjectives and adverbs where possible.
- Cut out redundancies where possible.
- Avoid exclamation marks.
- Avoid rhetorical questions.

One of the major things you need to do is simplify your work. Overblown, flowery language is not journalistic. Clear, simple, tight language hits the reader like an electrical charge and should need no extra dressing up.

The personal pronoun

In September 2001, the Australian journalist Roger Franklin wrote a feature story for The Age after witnessing the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York. Living there at the time, he found himself standing at the scene of one of the biggest stories of all time. He wrote without using the first person pronoun, I. In a sidebar, he explained the challenge of remaining invisible to his readers. Standing at ground zero while sirens wailed, Franklin felt the temptation to break this old rule. But he refused to compromise the tradition of remaining an observer rather than becoming a focus of the drama.

The feature writer has more scope than the news reporter to engage personally with the story. Most journalism educators approach the use of the first person narrative cautiously, neither rejecting nor advocating it but warning that while this problematic pronoun ‘I’ has a
place in magazines, it remains unwelcome in newspapers, except by special permission of the editor. The debate about its power as a literary and journalistic tool continues.

One of the first things young reporters learn is the importance of keeping yourself out of the story. It’s good advice, and in attempting to pull together a sketch of what my adopted city has been through this week, I’ve honoured that (Roger Franklin, *Age*, September 2001).

Some media writers advocate the first person as a more honest form than writing in the third person. This is because journalism can never be entirely objective; it involves choices about words and structure and the ideas they portray. Therefore, to reveal the writer’s own responses can seem like a more honest approach, acknowledging reality. Friedlander and Lee (2004:195) agree that the first person pronoun may be justified when the writer has experienced extraordinary events. The pronoun ‘I’ has to be earned. Do not use it gratuitously—there must be a point to it. It must pass the ‘Who cares?’ test.

Those pesky (or pestilent) pronouns! This is the question I hear more than any other in my writing classes: ‘Can we use the word *I*?’ (Johnson 2005:46)

Keep the ego in bounds

While we are free to push the limits of journalistic writing further in feature writing than we can in news, we are not free to be self-indulgent, a characteristic that irks editors and is to be avoided. Good editors like feature writers to be, primarily, *writers*: people who have talent for the craft of writing and a respect for its conventions and disciplines. Being paid to write can be a difficult gig to get and to keep. Acceptance of the need to keep the ego within bounds is very helpful for a longlasting career.

Colourful landscapes

The best features have an X factor that, to the extent it can be analysed, is most likely a magical combination of logical and clever structure, fine language use, great topic, thorough research, illustrative quotes and anecdotes, and a kind of visual or mental landscape that draws the reader in.

Sometimes a mechanism for achieving this is through the use of *colour* or *atmosphere*. To paraphrase Matthew Ricketson (2004), where hard news is about information, colour is about emotion. It is not all of feature writing, and its scope may be limited, because colour does not give the full story. But where the use of colour works, stories are given an unforgettable quality that lives on after the reader has put down the newspaper or magazine. It is deceptively difficult to do well, because it depends upon the journalist’s ability to observe and describe. To a certain extent, too, it depends upon the sensitivity and depth of knowledge of the writer.

It really helps to be culturally literate. To illustrate this, here are the opening passages from a Clive James piece, ‘Postcard from Japan 1: An Exchange of Views’ (1984):

---
By courtesy of a British Airways Boeing 707 I was crossing in a few hours the same distance that cost Marco Polo years of his life, but the speed of modern travel has its penalties. Among these had been the inflight movie, which I dimly remember was about bears playing baseball.

From the air, Siberia looks like cold nothing. The Sea of Japan looks like wet nothing. But Japan itself, at your first glimpse of it, looks like something. Even geographically it’s a busy place.

Immediately you are impressed by the wealth of detail—an impression that will never leave you for as long as you are there. Only a tenth of the land is useful for anything. The remaining nine-tenths, when you look down on it, is a kind of corduroy velvet: country so precipitously convoluted that the rivers flowing through it look like the silver trails of inebriated slugs. The useful tenth is inhabited, cultivated and industrialised with an intensity that boggles the Occidental mind. I have never seen anything like it in my life.

Seen from high up, the basic agricultural pattern of Western countries is of accumulated squares. America looks like a patchwork quilt; France like another quilt but with smaller patches; Britain like yet another quilt with smaller patches still. The basic agricultural pattern of Japan is of proliferating brain cells. Everywhere a rice paddy can possibly be put a rice paddy has been put, even if it is only the size of a table napkin.

Merging with this nervous tissue, like bionic grafts, are the areas of urban habitation and industry. One hundred and ten million live and work down there, most of them in conurbations which to the stratospheric eye look like infinitely elaborate printed circuits. You can tell straight away, before you even touch the ground, that in Japan there is nowhere anybody can hide. They’re all in it together.

This amusing and insightful piece on Japan demonstrates a range of skill not limited to knowing how to write well. James also demonstrates historical and geographical knowledge, an understanding of geopolitics, agricultural practices, electronic circuitry, arcane but apposite terminology (like Occidental), and indeed of concepts in science and specifically in neurology.

In other words, there is no point just observing if you don’t have the knowledge to give flesh to your observations. You can look but you won’t be able to see. And you won’t be able to write. The James piece is very simple in its words and structure for the most part, but that simplicity hints at a wide, sophisticated base of knowledge upon which he is drawing. Being able to see the connection between the agricultural pattern of Japan from the air and the notion of brain cells is not a given. A prepared mind has to make that connection.

James has deftly provided the reader with a visual image of the country that is about to be explored. He has created an atmosphere of nervousness and multitude and elaborateness. After setting the scene, he moves to an amusing anecdote about his difficulties getting past Japanese officials at the airport, an anecdote made all the more effective by the atmosphere that has already been invoked. Anyone reading this feature will form an emotional connection as well as an intellectual one.

There it is in essence: connecting readers to the subject matter is the point and the key to successful feature writing.

Elizabeth Hart and Liz Tynan
Tips on what to do and what to avoid

Make sure you always:
- be mindful of the need for accuracy, as much as for a news story
- find a workable blend of the elements of anecdote, statement of theme, quote and fact to make a satisfying and well-rounded story
- choose quotes with care
- add colour by deep observation refined through cultural literacy.

Make sure you never:
- use a feature as an opportunity for an ego trip or a dazzling display of experimental grammar
- overdo the pronoun ‘I’
- neglect the strict architecture of structure, even if you are subverting that structure.

To really shine, you should keep in mind that features are an important part of the conversation of humanity, and they should be written with due consideration to their role.

KEY REFERENCES