

Feature Writing

Thieves make good feature writers. What do I mean? Well the bottom line is that no-one can teach you good writing skills. Good writing skills have to be developed through effort. A major part of that effort is reading other people's features and stealing and adapting their devices and ideas, for example throwing unusual images and ideas at the reader, ending a paragraph or standfirst with a question to get the reader thinking (see the beginning of this paragraph).

Structure

'Method writing' may make for stagnant copy and devices can get played out, but features do follow standard structural patterns. This can be useful because often you want to adhere to the reader's expectation rather than give them a jolt.

At their most basic, features follow the three section rule of beginning, middle, end or exposition, development, resolution. Case studies, some of the most basic types of feature often follow this pattern precisely. Human interest stories often follow a pattern of introduction and rise, tragedy and fall, resolution and stability, for example: from working class background football player rises to the top of his profession, gets seduced by the high life and loses family and money, has a life transforming event, repents and describes how he is rebuilding his life.

The sections within the structure of a typical feature might be:

- intro (description paragraphs and then quotation from main character or featured expert)
- premise (summary paragraph of the main themes of the feature)
- context (most interesting background facts or information, possibly backed up by short quotation)
- analysis/anecdotes (deeper issues, experiences or secondary effects)
- outro paragraph (looking to the future, inspiring hope etc).

Discipline

Before starting to type anything, always jot down your ideas, group them and build a structure for your article. It is very tempting not to do this when it's press day and deadlines are looming but the discipline does pay off, even if you spend just 5 minutes putting together some kind of planned structure. Having a structure

means you know exactly how you are going to tell your story and prevents you from wandering off at a tangent.

When writing the piece always keep in mind three things:

- the focus of your feature (stick to the theme)
- who your readers are (think with the mind of the audience)
- whether you are sticking to your structure.

What is a feature not?

A feature is not a news story. Never use the inverted pyramid structure (see News Writing).

Feature boosters:

Attention grabbing intros, pithy points, punchy quotations (used in moderation), imagery, onomatopoeia, graphic verbs (eg wailed, slumped), final sentences which link one paragraph to the next.

Feature killers:

Cliches, ambiguity, jargon, generalisations, long sentences, passive language, redundant ideas, redundant words, boring quotations.

Words of warning:

Always ask to look at your feature after a sub-editor has had a go at it. It is your name on the byline and if the story has been hacked to a point where it no longer makes sense or flows it reflects on you. If you can get to see the laid out page before it goes to press so much the better. If there is a typing error in the headline, the larger the type size the worse it screams out. Be mindful that production deadlines are very stressful for all concerned so looking at your copy may be a privilege rather than a right.