

PART TWO

The Feature Article

CHAPTER 21

THE MAGAZINE FEATURE ARTICLE

IF YOU examine a copy of a magazine, you will find that its pages are largely filled with material which newspaper and magazine editors and writers call feature articles. These stories are normally secured in one of three ways: They may be written by members of the magazine staff; they may be written by men or women who are not associated with the staff but with whom the editor has negotiated for stories; or they may be written by "free lance" or occasional writers who submit their articles to the editor on their own volition. The proportion of material used by magazines from these sources varies greatly with the policies of the magazines. Some have a highly developed staff system and so depend largely upon their own writers to supply this class of material. Other magazines count upon securing from a large number of contributed stories the articles that will fit their particular policies and needs. Editors often make arrangements with well-known writers for special articles. The amount of material of this latter kind varies largely with the financial resources of the papers and the availability of writers who are qualified to handle particular subjects.

Newspapers, which also use feature articles, especially in their Sunday and magazine sections, secure them in practically the same ways, except that many of them also buy feature article material from news and feature syndicates. While the major emphasis in our discussion of feature articles will be on those designed for magazine publication, it must be kept in mind that the newspaper also offers a market for this type of material.

From the standpoint of the student of technical journalism who wishes to gain experience in reporting and writing, the newspaper type of feature article lends itself excellently as a medium. Campus stories may be found and written which may not have much if

any sale value, but they do furnish practice and they may often be used in campus newspapers and in student magazines in the fields of agriculture, home economics, and engineering. Technical news material also found on a campus is often the best possible material for magazine feature articles of informational value. Frequently the same material will serve both for a newspaper and a magazine feature, though requiring somewhat different treatment in writing.

What is a feature article? Just where lies the line of demarcation which separates a news story or a news experience story from a feature story or article is not easy to say—for the reason, perhaps, that there is no such line. In a newspaper there are news stories and feature articles; in a magazine there are news stories and feature articles. They have marked differences, but one will get into difficulties if he thinks of them as widely separate types of writing.

Suppose you take one issue each of four different magazines dealing with agriculture, home economics, engineering, and science. Ignore the editorial page, the fiction, the shorter news stories, the correspondence. Read through rapidly all of the longer articles, noting the following things: title, author, opening paragraphs, the main ideas or facts brought out by the article, the manner in which the story is told. Form as you read an idea of what group or class of readers would be interested in the story.

With this material in mind, investigate the following statements:

1. The feature article occupies a position between the news story and news-experience story on the one hand and the fiction story and the essay on the other, although its relation to the news story is much closer than to fiction and the essay.

2. Whereas fiction is concerned with imaginative material and the essay with the personal thoughts and reactions of the writer, the feature article has to do with the reporting of actual facts, happenings, movements, or the description of people, places, and things.

3. It differs from the news story primarily in this regard: The news story is what may be called a *two-dimensional story* while the feature article has *three dimensions*. The news story reports something that occurred at a particular time and place. It has no

before or after. Theoretically, at least, the reporter is an automaton for recording visual, auditory, or other impressions. This theory precludes his explanation of events or prophecy as to their effect. The news story has, in other words, only surface extent; it has little or no historical depth. The feature article, on the other hand, may include, besides the reporting of the main ideas, a history of their growth or development, a glance into the future, the ideas of the author upon the subject; it may be written in the first person.

4. While the feature article deals primarily with objective, factual material, it is related to fiction and essay in style, in organization of material, and in the right of the author to present his own ideas and reactions.

Perhaps we have now sufficiently delimited the subject to make an attempt at a definition: A magazine feature article is an account of an actual event, person, or condition, of interest to a considerable number of readers; it has latitude to present any material which will make clear the central theme of the story; and in it the author may incorporate, if he chooses, his own ideas upon the subject.

Comparison of feature article and news story: To illustrate the difference, recall the account in a previous chapter of Smith, the student reporter, who secured an interview with a farm crops professor on hybrid seed corn and learned that while aphids had damaged such seed corn severely, it had been found that certain hybrids were resistant to aphids. What he wrote from the interview was a news story. Or it might just as well be called a news information story.

But if Smith, the reporter, wished to use what he learned as an idea for a feature story, he would proceed to do quite a bit more of reporting. He would investigate the development of hybrid seed corn and find out how such corn had been created to overcome defects in open-pollinated corn. Aphids then would be revealed as still another defect to be overcome. He would not be content with interviewing only the farm crops man, but he would talk also with an entomologist who could give him facts about aphids, how they work, how often infestations may be expected.

He would want, further, to find out over how wide a territory

the aphid infestation had extended and what the damage was in other states. He would ask about hybrids in other states. He would come across human interest angles. It was first thought the trouble was some disease, and plant pathologists had been called in, who found that an insect and not a disease, was the enemy of the corn. One scientist had devised a handy new gadget to aid in the research that had been necessary.

So when Smith had finished his investigation, he had material for far more than just a news story. He had the facts in hand to write a feature article, suitable for either a state or a national farm paper.

For an illustration in the field of engineering, it was once news that water in large amounts had been escaping under the Hales Bar Dam on the Tennessee River, some thirty-three river miles downstream from Chattanooga. This dam later came under the control of the TVA. Engineers of the TVA employed a unique way for stopping this escaping flow by drilling a series of vertical overlapping holes, using a calyx drill. These holes were filled with concrete to form a cutoff wall down to solid rock, in some cases extending to depths of from 100 to 163 feet. This was news.

But engineers wanted to know more than that. So a reporter, on investigating, found that the dam had a long history of all kinds of trouble ever since construction was started in 1905, and water had always flowed under it. He found a long series of facts and legends about attempts made at various times to stop this flow. The reasons for the water flow were interesting. The new attempt to control was a different way of going about it.

The special drills used, the drilling operations, getting out the cores, use of asbestos-cement pipe liner, type of cement, and method of placing it, ideas tried and discarded, new machinery being used for the work, men in charge of the work—all these were things which the reporter had to investigate. Photographs—of the work, of pipe, of the cores recovered—and technical drawings had to be secured.

The story about all these things was what could be called a magazine feature article. Just such a story can be found in the

November 6, 1941, issue of *Engineering News-Record*, under the title of "Stopping a River Under a Dam." It is not signed, but was evidently written either by a member of the staff of this periodical, or by an engineer in close contact with the work.

A home economics student in a technical journalism class brought in a story that further illustrates the difference between a news and a feature story. Her story related that the farmer's daughter annually spends nearly twice as much for her clothes as does the farmer's wife. The facts were disclosed by a summary, recently completed, of household account records kept by a number of farm women of the state, in cooperation with state home economics extension specialists.

This was news, a home economics extension news story. It was a good news story. Written in a sprightly manner, it was good enough for the state newspapers, or might even have been carried across the country by press associations. Yet the instructor in the journalism course did not accept it as it was on an assignment to get a feature story on home economics extension work. So using this news as a tip, the student went to work to transform her news story into a feature article.

She had to find out how many farm women had kept these records and in how many counties. On examination of the state-wide summary she began to find other interesting facts. For instance, the farmer's son spent a lot more on his clothes than did the father. Clothing was only one of a considerable number of items kept in the record. Others were food bought, food produced on the farm, money spent for new equipment and furnishings in the home, cost of electric service in the home, how much was spent for movies and travel. She learned that many farm women and their daughters buy perfumes, that quite a number of farm women own formal party gowns.

As she pursued her inquiries further, the reporter found that keeping these household records was nothing new. This was an extension project that had been carried on in the state for about twenty years. Annual summaries for each year were on file in the home economics extension office. So she began to make com-

parisons between the first year, a year during the depression period of the early thirties, and the year just past. Immediately a vista of changes in farm household buying opened up.

She inquired of the extension specialists as to just what type of farm women kept these records. Were they from the upper bracket income group, the middle group, or the low income group? Were they wives of owners or of tenants? Did they live on large farms or small? She wanted human interest details and specific examples of things these women had learned from record keeping and of how buying practices had been modified in consequence.

To handle the assignment right, she would have needed to spend a day with the extension specialist in attending one or more county meetings to see the women who kept the accounts and hear their discussion of the year's records. This was not possible for the student reporter, but it was possible for a reporter who wrote just such a story for the household page of a farm magazine. Such a meeting, followed later by a visit to some of the homes of the farm women, to talk with them and to meet their families, would have supplied ample human interest.

Following all this investigation, the student reporter had the material for writing a feature article that would be informative, comprehensive, and full of interest. It would be all this, provided she presented and interpreted the facts gathered, so that such a story would be the result of her work.

To cite one more example, a senior student majoring in vocational agriculture, wrote a story as a journalism class assignment telling that John Doe, a vocational high school student, had been given the award of State Future Farmer. The story gave the details of the work and the accomplishments of young John which had led to his getting this award. This was news.

But the assignment was to write a feature story. So the student reporter traveled to the home of young John to get additional details and human interest. When he arrived at the boy's home, he found that John had three older brothers who had also been State Future Farmers in years past. So he visited all four of the boys, three of whom were now farming. He secured the stories of the four, took pictures of them. Then he talked with their father

and secured his story too, with facts about the home farm and the circumstances under which the boys had carried on their project work so successfully. When he finished he had a feature story good enough for any farm paper in the country.

To continue a comparison between a news story and a feature article, you will of course find one fundamental similarity. News stories and feature articles are always based upon actual facts, actual events, actual movements or currents of thought, actual people. There is no primary place in either for the fictitious or the imaginary. But even here we have to differentiate slightly, for the feature article may occasionally introduce fictitious characters, fictitious anecdotes, or other nonfact material as illustrative of the main facts of the story. This distinction will be elaborated later.

There are other minor similarities that will occur to you as you study the two forms of writing, but an analysis of the differences will advance us further toward a grasp of the characteristics of the feature article.

NEWS STORY

Scope—The news story, and we are not here speaking of the ephemeral story of accident or fire, but of the more significant phases of the news, is normally much shorter in mere number of words than the feature article. It is usually limited to a single time and a single place. In one sense it is not a complete story. It is but today's installment of a continued story, to get all of which you frequently must have read the paper for weeks and months before today and will have to read it for weeks to come. This is true of many of the more important news stories.

Newness—The newspaper puts a tremendous premium upon the recency of its news. It must be new in two senses: The event narrated must have occurred within a few hours of the time of publication, and the account, to be untarnished, must not have been previously published, at least in the same form, in a rival paper.

Seasonableness—News is affected only in a moderate degree by the round of the seasons. The fact that it is summer makes

FEATURE ARTICLE

Scope—The feature story is a complete unit. It may vary from a few hundred to several thousand words in length, but it is always self-sufficient, gives always, or should give, all of the data necessary to complete understanding of the question under discussion. It does not represent, then, a single point either of time or space. It has, in other words, a before and after.

Newness—The feature article, from the mere fact that it appears in a publication which is issued only once a week or even less often, cannot put this emphasis upon recency. The factor of newness in the sense that the stories must cover virgin or uncultivated soil is equally potent with the magazine as with the newspaper.

Seasonableness—With the feature article seasonableness is as important as timeliness is with the news story. In the

available certain types of stories, the vacation story, the hot weather story. Fall, winter, spring also exert their influence. Christmas, the Fourth, Thanksgiving bring their news stories. But, as affecting the great mass of the news, this element of seasonableness is negligible.

Lead—The lead of the news story is very closely prescribed. There are, of course, various kinds of leads, but each of them has its formula. The writer has an opportunity for originality only within the limits of these formulæ.

Body Arrangement—As in the case of the lead, the news story follows a fairly definite tradition in the arrangement of the body of the story. Normally the factor of chronology is of minor importance, and the facts of the story are arranged in order of their value with such omissions and abridgements as will make the outstanding news facts of the story most prominent.

Author and Story—Except in the case of well-known special correspondents, the writer of the news story is anonymous. He not only has no name, but he has no ideas, as far as his story is concerned. He may not tell what he thinks; he is limited to the objective facts which he sees and hears. He may not write in the first person and he seldom may use the second person of direct address.

Style—The keynote of newspaper style is exposition. The function of the news story is to reproduce, recreate, for the reader some event or idea. It is safe to say that, normally, the best newspaper style is one which is most clearly and vividly expository. There is little or no room in the news story for stylistic flourishes. The story is read for what is said, not for how it is said. There is, of course, considerable narrative material in news

case of either the agricultural or the women's magazine, many stories that are good at one time in the year are practically worthless at another. The writer has to bear this factor constantly in mind, planning his articles far enough ahead that they will have time to get into print when they will be most valuable.

Lead—There are no rules to govern the beginning of the feature article as there are in the case of the news story. There are, naturally, certain principles of effectiveness, for which quality the news lead is valuable, that must be observed—these will be discussed later—but for the most part the writer is untrammelled by any dogmatic limitations of form.

Body Arrangement—All that can be said in a brief space concerning the body arrangement of the feature article is that it follows no explicit laws except this pre-eminent one: The body of the story shall be arranged in such a way as to present most effectively the material of the particular story.

Author and Story—The feature article is usually signed. If not, it is understood that it is written by a member of the magazine staff. The writer, therefore, has a name and a personality, and the latter he may carry throughout the story if he wishes. He may say what he thinks about the matters under discussion. He may interpret, exhort, forecast. He may use the first and second person pronouns. He may thus add much to his material by projecting into it the charm of the personal and the intimate.

Style—The feature article, read at greater leisure and comparatively unrestricted as to length, may employ a much more varied style than the news story. Its purpose is not only to explain but, frequently, to entertain. To this end an interesting and readable style is an asset. The style should, however, reflect the tone of the article. Exposition, narration, description are all tools in feature article building. In general the feature article

stories, but in effect it is usually subordinate to the expositional purpose. There is little description for its own sake. This situation has developed from the nature of the function of the news story and the condition of haste under which it is normally read. There may be news writing for very high quality, even of literary excellence, but the news story is to be judged primarily on the effectiveness with which it recreates the facts.

Constructive Purpose—From one point of view all is grist that comes to the newspaper mill. The newspaper is a photograph of current events—those events, at least, which are important or interesting enough to attract a considerable group of readers. It takes life as it is and reproduces it. As long as there are sordidness, dishonesty, pettiness in the world, they are apt to be found in newspapers. Many newspapers try to emphasize the constructive, the wholesome, and the worthwhile elements in the news, but the very nature of the material with which they deal makes it almost impossible for them entirely to eliminate the other kind of material.

Audience—The modern newspaper is built for an audience of all ages and conditions. It is read by rich and poor, educated and uneducated. It contains material which will appeal to all interests. It does not specialize; on the other hand, it is very highly diversified.

may be, if the nature of the subject justifies it, more ornate, imaginative, free, in a stylistic sense, than the news story.

Constructive Purpose—The feature article must be constructive or helpful. There is scarcely a technical magazine in the country that will use articles which will not help to upbuild, encourage, inspire, or entertain. This condition rules out stories which present merely a destructive criticism of life. The article must help and encourage, not hinder or discourage. This requirement does not, of course, rule out all stories of failure, dishonesty, the darker and less wholesome side of life, if such stories can be presented in a way to illustrate a constructive purpose. If failure can be shown to be only the negative side of success, the writer may occasionally deal with failures.

Audience—Most magazines have set out, not to reach the entire public, as the newspaper does, but to interest some particular group or class of people. The farm papers are made for farmers and the families of farmers. Engineering magazines are made for engineers. The women's magazines are made for women. In other words, the magazine audience is a selected audience, and the material which the magazine uses must also be selected with this particular audience in mind. Every magazine, due to this fact and to others, has a distinctive personality with which the writer must get acquainted if he is to write successfully for the magazine.

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Examine three issues of a farm, engineering, scientific, or women's magazine. Determine as well as you can the source of the feature articles, that is, whether they were written by staff writers, by free lance writers, or came from some other source.

2. Write a short feature story. Do the best you can with this story on the basis of your casual knowledge of feature articles. This story should be kept, and later, after subsequent chapters have been studied, rewritten or revised.

3. Clip and turn in, if you can find such, the same story told in one place as a straight news or news-experience story, and told elsewhere as a feature article. An example would be a story of some disaster or striking event at some locality which would be followed in a day or so by a feature article about that locality.

(*Note:* During the study of this and the chapters to follow students should write as many feature articles as time and circumstances allow.)