

CHAPTER 22

TYPES OF FEATURE ARTICLES

FEATURE articles can be analyzed on two bases, one the *source* of the subject matter and the other the *nature* of the subject matter.

Every article has a "home," a place where it "lives." One story may "live" in an office in Des Moines, another on a farm in Ohio, a third may be in a home economics laboratory at Oregon State College, a fourth in the railroad yards at Chicago. It is possible even to think of a feature story "living" not only in a single office, or a single house, or on a single farm, but in a whole town, an entire community. The story of a successful consolidated school, for instance, does not "live" merely in the school building. It includes the town and the community that made the school possible and are making it pay its way in value returned. One can even conceive of a story which "lives" in a whole state or even in the whole nation. The story of the development of paved highways may be handled as a state story or even as a national story.

Feature articles classified as to source: In short, we find that there are three kinds of feature articles on what we may call the basis of the source of material. These are:

1. The story that originates with a single person.
2. The story that originates in a single town or community.
3. The story that deals with an extensive district—county, state, or nation.

Does the story that you contemplate writing concern itself exclusively with a single person, a single home, or a single farm? Or does its scope take in a group or community interest? Or does it transcend even this boundary?

These are questions that you will have to put to yourself and answer with exactitude before you are ready to begin reporting

the story. Failure to analyze the scope of the story is very apt to lead to incomplete or one-sided reporting of it. You set out to get the story of a rural church that has revolutionized the social life of a backward rural community. The regeneration is largely the work of the minister, but is the story, in reality, the minister's story, or is it the story of the community? It is essential that this distinction be made. If the story is to be a personality study of the minister, an interview with him may furnish all of the material that is necessary. But if the article is to tell the story of the community and its awakening, the writer will probably need to do more than talk to the minister, although what he says may furnish the backbone of the article. The story will not be complete unless it reflects the attitudes and opinions of all the elements in the community, farmers, merchants, housewives, children. Only by doing this can it hope to recreate the atmosphere of this community and give the reader an adequate picture of its transformation.

Just such an article as this appeared in a magazine not long ago. In order to make it a dramatic story, the magazine reporter who handled it based the story on the personality of one citizen of the community and gave him the credit for what had happened in the community. He did not state, perhaps he had failed to discover the fact, that the story began a number of years before, when the local minister and a rural sociology extension worker from the state agricultural college, together planned the whole project. For several years the minister had quietly worked to get things under way. Then this citizen became aware of it, took a part, and proceeded to publicize himself as the man responsible for it all. After the article appeared, the magazine and the writer stood discredited in the community, which knew the real facts.

Feature articles classified as to subject matter: Of the genus *feature article*, when we consider it from the point of view of subject matter, there are a number of varieties; and to the successful producer of the product it is as necessary to know the nature of each variety as it is for the orchardist to know the kinds of trees in his orchard, their characteristics and life habits. The orchardist must know how to grow each kind of fruit, and having grown it, how

and where to market it. The problem of the feature writer is parallel. He must understand how to recognize and classify the germ of each feature story, how to cultivate it, and where to dispose of the story when it is matured. And this figure will lend itself to still another analogy. Just as there are hybrid and crossbred fruits, so there are feature articles in which are blended more than a single strain.

It is obvious that no classification of feature article types will be absolute. There will be variations from type and combinations of varieties. But unless the writer knows how to distinguish the particular type of material with which he is working in any particular story, unless he can analyze and classify it, he will be working at some disadvantage.

There are five types of feature articles:

1. *The news-feature article*, which deals with a news occurrence, such as a conference, convention, fair, short course, field day, election, experiment, project, construction.
2. *The process article*, which tells how to do or make something.
3. *The experience article*, which relates the experience of some individual or group of individuals.
4. *The information article*, which presents, in an impersonal way, general information or scientific facts.
5. *The personality article*, which presents the personality of some individual or group of individuals.

The journalism student, or any writer in fact, should keep in mind that the story or article that the editor of today wants most is one which has news quality, one which is based on news or which is timely because it is related to something that is news. This applies equally for any of these five types of feature articles. The writer who forgets this fundamental fact will have a hard time interesting an editor in anything he may write.

The news-feature article: If one investigates the contents of technical magazines, he will see that a large number of feature articles are follow-ups on news events. In fact, many of the longer articles in these magazines could be classed either as news stories or as feature articles. A typical feature story, however, will do

more than a news story. It will analyze and interpret the news, giving the background to events described and pointing out the implication of these events.

To this type belong stories of meetings and conventions, of fairs, shows and sales, extension campaigns, current fights against pests and diseases, and new research findings. Here, too, can be classified stories of great droughts, abnormal movements of farm population, such as that to the Pacific Coast in recent years; changes in agriculture taking place on a wide scale; coming of new crops; efforts to produce crops, seeds, and other products in this country which were imported before a world war broke; stories based on defense, war, and its aftermath as they affect the farm, the home, and any kind of industry or business. Introduction of new machinery or equipment which will mean important or revolutionary change is of this type—be it on the farm, in the home, or in industry.

The many activities of the United States Department of Agriculture, especially those since 1933 with regard to crop control, soil conservation, and aid to distressed farmers, and the more recent campaigns to produce more food as a defense measure, are subjects for news-feature articles. Great engineering construction projects of the past decade or so have been told in news-features. New developments in industry come likewise in this classification, as for example homogenized milk in dairy manufacturing.

Hardly a day goes by in which there isn't something in the news which needs a re-telling, an amplification or an interpretation in feature article form for one or more classes of readers.

The process article: This type of feature in its simpler forms has already been discussed in the chapter dealing with the short information and experience articles. But now we must consider it as a somewhat broader form than the story which, in a few hundred words, merely describes a device or a simple process. We must include under this type all stories which tell:

1. How to perform some definite, concrete process.
2. How to construct some specific thing.

The prominence of this type of article in technical magazines is obvious. Turn through half a dozen current magazines and list

the titles of stories of this sort. In the women's magazines you will find stories which tell how to perform a large variety of household duties—canning, room decoration, refinishing of furniture, and so on. Stories on house design and construction fall into this category.

In the agricultural papers there are almost as many stories of this sort: corn testing methods, farm building construction, farm water and light systems, drainage, concrete construction.

The process story is prominent in engineering and scientific magazines. In the former are descriptions of construction methods, new devices, and equipment; in the latter, descriptions of research techniques and apparatus.

The particular sign of this type of story, then, is that it shall give direction as to how to perform some helpful, necessary process or how to make some useful construction. It is a service article and must give information which will cause the reader to say, in substance at least, "I'm going to try that out." It must have novelty and utility.

An effective article of this type must be one which will apply to a fairly large number of readers of a magazine. There is little use to tell readers of a general farm paper the details of how to build a large greenhouse. A home magazine read by two or three million women is interested in plans for a house costing \$5,000 to \$8,000, but not in one costing \$50,000. Nor are many women interested in a recipe which calls for some ingredient which cannot be bought at the community grocery. It should be something which can be readily done or carried out by the average person, with equipment at hand, and without highly specialized knowledge. Beginning writers often fail to realize these facts.

A specific illustration concerns blue cheese. For years the United States had depended upon France, Denmark, and some other foreign countries for Roquefort and other similar blue cheeses. After Europe was involved in war in 1939, importation of blue cheese from Europe was cut off. Promptly the dairy manufacturing industry in this country began to make blue cheese. In most cases it was made according to methods developed by previous research work at the Iowa and the Minnesota agricultural experi-

ment stations. The making of such cheese in the United States was a good subject for news-feature articles, of wide interest to many classes of citizens.

But it would have been of doubtful value to use an article on the subject in a general farm paper or in the foods section of a women's magazine, giving details of how to make blue cheese. To make it required equipment such as only a dairy plant had or could install; it required either a cave or an artificially constructed room for curing, and only men with technical skill and experience could do it. On the other hand, the technical process article on how to make it would be an admirable story for a dairy trade paper to use.

The experience article: The experience article, in the definite sense in which we know it today, is a comparatively modern type, but the principle on which its effectiveness depends is as old as human intercourse. This kind of story gets its peculiar force from that subtle and pervasive something which newspaper men know as human interest.

Now, technical magazines are missionary in character and purpose—a respect in which they differ in degree from magazines of a general nature. In one guise or another practically all of their material is preachment, which is only another phrasing of the statement that the pre-eminent rule of their being is that they must be constructive. They have to keep not only in step with the development of the times, but a stride or two ahead. They must lead, instruct, build. But here they come upon another very deep-rooted human characteristic. They collide with the pride of men, who do not like to be told what they should and should not do. This puts magazines and readers into a paradoxical position: Readers want to profit by the good inherent in magazine preachment, but they will not tolerate sermons.

If you try to tell a farmer that his whole system of farming is inadequate, wasteful, unscientific, you will, in nine cases out of ten, run up against a stone wall of opposition. He will inform you that he has always made things go by following his own methods, and that they are good enough for him. If you expostulate with an experienced housewife that she is slowly killing her family

through ignorance of dietetics, she will laugh at you and show you that her children and husband are still drawing breath.

Yet the farm magazine must say just this sort of thing to the farmers, and the women's magazines must say just this sort of thing to the women. And in lesser degree the engineering and scientific journals are engaged in the same task.

The problem of the magazine then is to preach without seeming to preach. And it is just here that the experience story comes in. The experience article, instead of telling John White that his system of crop rotation is sapping the fertility of his soil, instead of telling him that he should abandon it for a different system, narrates the story of Amos Fitch, a practical farmer who has adopted and proved the economic value of the new system. Instead of telling mothers that meat and potatoes three times a day do not comprise an adequate diet for growing children, the women's magazine prints the story of a community where mothers have been induced to try a more diversified diet, gives the results of these experiments—and leaves the reader to draw her own conclusions.

There are three kinds of experience articles:

1. Personal experience.
2. Confession.
3. Experience of some person or persons other than the writer, which, for want of a better name, we shall call third person experience article, because it is told in the third person rather than the first.

The personal experience article: That the experience article is effective is largely due to the fact that it presents the actual testimony of real people. They have a local habitation and a name. You can, if you wish, go to their town and look them up. You can find their names in the telephone book. What they say or what is said about them is not, therefore, supposition or theory. It is testimony. They testify to the fact that certain practices have been advantageous or disadvantageous to them. They talk, as it were, to the reader, backing their assertions with their own personalities and records for probity.

In the personal experience article this effect is particularly strong,

for, in it, it is the writer himself who is narrating actual experiences, which he himself has had and for which he vouches. The story is intimate, personal, real. Instead of dealing with abstractions or impersonalities, it has the fascination which always accompanies a glimpse into the life of a human being—it has human interest. The author talks directly to the reader. He writes in the first person, frequently in a chatty, intimate style—much as if he and the reader were actually conversing.

There is no type of story that is more salable than a worthwhile personal experience article. The difficulty is that no writer has an unlimited number of personal experiences which lend themselves to articles. He is bound to exhaust his supply sooner or later. For this reason, although this kind of story is one of the best for the beginner to try, it cannot become a permanent reliance of the feature writer.

The confession article: The confession article is an anonymous personal experience story. Being unsigned, it provides an opportunity for an even more intimate and personal type of material than the personal experience story. From the point of view of human interest, it is more fascinating and readable than any other kind of feature article. You would like to read, would you not, the personal story of a blue sky promoter, how he works his schemes—prepares his bait and pulls in his fish? It would be difficult, perhaps, to get a blue sky promoter to write such a story under his own signature, but it is not out of the range of possibility that he might be willing to write an unsigned confession story.

The third person experience article: The third kind of experience story—that in which the writer reports the experiences of a person or a group of people rather than himself—is, from the point of view of the professional feature writer, the most important of the experience articles. This is true from the fact that, while it has the attraction of human interest and the force of testimony, the sources of this type of story are inexhaustible. There is not a county, scarcely a township, in the United States which does not contain material for a story of this sort that would be acceptable to some magazine.

The farm papers, especially, are using this type of article to

put before their readers the agricultural practices in which they believe. If a farm paper is interested in pushing the growing of alfalfa, it can do so most effectively by reporting the stories of farmers who are raising alfalfa with success. It can preach co-operation by relating the stories of successful cooperative enterprises. It can hammer away, issue after issue, by piling up these instances. And they are, remember, in every case the testimony of successful practitioners.

Engineering, science, and women's magazines have made an important, although somewhat slighter, use of this kind of article. But there is here, also, an unlimited field for the experience article.

In most cases the experience story should deal with typical rather than extremely unusual experiences. This rule is one of the hardest lessons to learn. The beginning writer almost invariably thinks that a story must be something extraordinary before a paper will publish it. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that the story to get of a farm, farmer, engineering enterprise, or community is one illustrating some good idea or method, so that any other farmer or engineer, on reading, can apply the information contained in it to his own business.

General information article: It is easier to give a negative than a positive definition of this type of feature article—easier to say that it is not a process story, that it is not an experience story, nor a news-feature story, nor a personality story. But when all these negatives are stated there still remains a large class of stories which fall under the head of general information article. Positively, then, the information article is one which presents in an impersonal form an account of some movement, discovery, experiment, scientific data, condition of life, business, or other activity, art, or pastime. Stories, for instance, which describe the national park system of the country, or disclose experiments with vitamins in human diet, or discuss the question of farm leases, would be of this sort.

These stories transcend personal experience; they are derived from wider and impersonal sources. They deal with people only incidentally. Farm papers use many stories of this type which describe experiments carried on by the state agricultural experi-

ment stations and the department of agriculture, articles on scientific agriculture by leaders in agricultural investigation, and stories on agricultural economics. In women's magazines they are almost equally prominent, dealing with many of the problems of the home, with family relationships, community affairs, recreation, schools, health, and citizenship. Science furnishes many such articles—the results of the work of the laboratory, of exploration, of surveys. In the engineering magazines one finds general information articles dealing with every phase of engineering development.

Sad to relate, this is the type of story that a beginning journalism student is prone to write. It is so easy to extract the information from a textbook, a bulletin, a research article, a term paper, and the like. It can be written at a study table without a lot of reporting and digging. Yet it is the story which should be shunned by the student or beginning writer.

If the editor wants such an information article, he himself or some member of his staff can write it. Or if he prefers, he can have it written by someone who can speak with authority and whose name carries weight—the agronomy research man, the authority on foods, the head of the department of mechanical engineering, the chief engineer on a construction job. The last person under the sun he wants to write it is a college student.

The personality article: This type of article is, naturally, the story of a person. It is closely related to the experience story, but it differs in this regard: Whereas the experience story tells what someone has done, the personality story tells what someone is. It depends for its appeal almost entirely upon the elements of human interest and unusualness; and it has two primary effects—it is inspirational and entertaining.

Not every individual in the world is a fit subject for a personality story—probably only a few in a thousand. Such a person must be interesting. That means that he must have done something outstanding or unusual or he must have a unique point of view toward life. Find the person who meets these requirements, and you have the material for a good story.

This type of feature story is or may be practically identical with a personality interview. Often the writer uses the interview tech-

nique in telling the story. The most effective way to tell many a story is to let the personality relate it in his or her own words, as much as possible.

Writers sometimes miss the big element in a story, the important news or information angle, in an effort to create an effective picture of the personality. A man's lifetime of work, some notable achievement, some important information, should not be sacrificed just to set forth human interest and personal details about someone. There should be room for both in the well-written personality article.

Any college campus has a number of important men and women on the faculty and research staff who are worth good personality stories. The president or dean who has just retired from office, the man who has just completed some outstanding research, the faculty member awarded some national medal or honor, the professor who has just returned from acting as technical adviser to a foreign country, are illustrations. The sun never sets on the graduate students trained by a modest, retiring emeritus professor on one university campus. In his quiet way he has trained more important men in his particular technical field than any other teacher in the world. The student reporter who finds him at his desk in a little office on the top floor will have a real personality story to write.

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Find five examples each of the three types of stories based on source of material.
2. List three subjects of stories which you think you could get and write up, and discuss the sources of information for each.
3. Find and study ten examples of news-feature stories. Repeat this assignment with each of the four other types of articles.
4. Write short feature articles illustrative of each of the five types.