

CHAPTER 25

WRITING THE FEATURE STORY

ON YOUR desk are a typewriter, some piles of notes, a folder of clippings and data, a few bulletins, a reference book or two.

These are the raw materials. Out of them you are to fashion a story. But how? What are the steps in the process? In what way can this raw material be best converted into a finished product, one that an editor will want to pay for and publish and that his readers will read with interest and profit?

Consider an analogy. You are going to build a house. You have the lot, the lumber, the bricks, the cement, and all the rest of the materials. But before you can begin the excavation or lay the foundation, you must draw up your plan. You must decide in the first place what kind of house it is going to be. Then the size and the shape and the arrangement must be worked out. And finally blueprints have to be made to guide you in the various steps of the construction.

A story is a structure. If it is to be interesting, effective, complete, it must be planned just as the house is planned. A "blueprint" must be made to guide you in "building" your story, and into this blueprint must go all that you know about the "architecture" of the feature article.

Preliminary planning: Different writers have their own methods of going about the job of preparing to write an article. But they all plan their work. The experienced writer may, in the case of short or simple stories, perfect his plan in his head. More often he jots down a rough outline of the story to guide him in its construction. For the beginner in writing this is essential, and it is helpful even to experienced writers.

However, before making an actual outline, a certain amount of preliminary planning is advisable, for which the writer may well set down the answers to the following suggested questions:

1. For what particular publication or type of publication is the story intended? If you have an assignment from an editor or are a staff writer, that of course is settled. But if not, then you must have some aim in mind. Until you do have, you cannot settle upon the method of handling your material. You cannot know about style, use of technical terms or words, length of article, scope to be covered, and other details.

2. For what kind of reader are you writing the story? It is apparent that stories for farmers, for chemical engineers, for city people, for women, or for boys or girls, will be written differently. The failure to realize this—to picture the reader of the story—is one of the most frequent causes of failure among beginners in feature writing. Usually one will want to have a particular publication in mind, although with some kinds of stories it will be enough to have a type of publication in mind. But you can't stop even here. You need also to try to picture the typical reader of this publication and write your story as you think he would like to have it written, or, better yet, as if you were talking to him in a friendly, intimate way.

A certain magazine writer on subjects drawn from his particular field of technical information and experience was asked to write a department for a magazine with which he was unfamiliar. Before he would undertake it, he asked the editor as to who his readers were and where they lived. The answer was that the readers were people of middle to old age and of moderate or average means who lived in smaller cities and towns in certain sections of the country. By directing what he wrote to readers such as these, this writer has been able to conduct his department successfully. His writing here has had to be quite different from what he writes for publication elsewhere.

3. What form will your story take? Sometimes there is just one possibility. But at other times you have to decide whether it will be a process story, a personal experience story, a third-person experience story, an information story, or perhaps a news or interview type.

4. What should be the central idea of the story? Set it down in a single sentence. A good feature article must be a unified

whole, with a singleness of purpose. It must have a big idea, and everything in the story must put across that idea. To this end the writer must have a clear conception of the idea, and this he can best secure by writing it out. It may never appear in that many words in the story itself, but it may be the keystone of the whole structure, none the less.

5. What will make a good beginning? This is so important that as the reporter works to gather his material, he should be on the lookout for the ideas with which to start his story. By the time he is ready to plan his story the beginning should be framing itself in his mind, although he may later, when the actual writing begins, be able to discover a better beginning than any of which he has previously thought.

6. What manner of writing should be employed in the story? Most stories contain both narrative and expository elements (as well as description, of course, although it is usually a minor factor), but one or the other of these styles will need, for the sake of unity of effect, to predominate and constitute the typical method employed. The same is true of the person used. It is well, however, to plan to make some use of the first person in most stories, even though the third person is to be employed predominantly.

7. What about illustrations? Pictures and drawings, or plans if it is a technical journal story, constitute important feature article material. The experienced reporter endeavors to secure photographs as the story is gathered, if they are available, and often takes his own pictures on the spot. A journalism student, however, or one who did not have opportunity to travel in gathering material, may not have pictures at hand. If not, plans may be made for securing them elsewhere.

Make an outline: Either before or after considering these points, the writer will read through his notes and other material gathered. Perhaps, as he reads, he will roughly classify them by putting them in little piles on his desk. The first real step toward writing is *the making of a written outline of the order in which the material is to be used in the article.*

This outline will probably be rather rough in form, but it should give ample support to the central idea or purpose previously determined. When completed, it should be studied with some care,

to see if it cannot be improved by rearrangement of the essential points into a more logical order. When this revision is finished, then the actual writing is begun.

Building the story—the first draft: First, of course, the writer must put down the lead he has decided to use, making sure that it suggests the central idea or purpose of the article.

Then he follows through his outline, working out each division or element in it by setting forth facts, explaining details, quoting an authority, relating an experience, making a point clear by means of an anecdote, amplifying with statistics.

In the process of arranging and setting down in words our material, we are confronted with a problem that is so individual to each story that only a few general suggestions can profitably be made. Into one or another, however, of a few typical forms or arrangements of material, most feature stories will fall.

Many feature articles, especially those of the news-feature type and less frequently the information type, may be handled just as the news story is handled, with an inverted pyramid arrangement. This would be the case with stories that have a strong news element.

Other articles, particularly the experience stories of all kinds, will be written largely as chronological narrative. The task with these articles is to tell the story of the experience of some person or some group of people, and the narrative which traces the history of the experience is usually the most natural and effective method.

In many stories of this sort the writer can effectively employ the flash-back device. That is, he can begin the story, not at the beginning, in a time sense, but nearer the climax of the narrative and then go back, after this more interesting material is presented, to pick up the antecedent events.

Process stories can best be arranged in a logical sequence. In such articles the major task is to make clear how to do something. The notes for the story will usually include data on the materials to be used, the steps in performing the process, some description of the finished product, and the costs.

The reader should be given, first, a clear conception of the goal of the process, the finished product. Then he must be given information as to the materials necessary. After that the steps in the process can be recounted in the order in which they will be

taken. Finally some idea of the cost should be given, if this factor has any bearing on the reader's determination to do or not to do the thing that you recommend. Sometimes, if the question of cost is important, this material should be put nearer the beginning of the story, probably after the description of the finished product.

In cases where one fears that his story will be dull if it is told in the conventional expository manner, if it lacks human and dramatic interest, he may cast it into fictional form, putting over his idea by means of imaginary incidents and characters. This device will be used especially in the case of process and information stories, which are characteristically weak in human interest.

With this type of arrangement, the fiction is merely a vehicle to carry the idea of the story, to make it possible to tell the story as narrative rather than exposition.

There is, however, a distinct danger in handling stories in this manner. Fiction, to be good fiction, must create a sense of reality. It must make the effect upon the reader, not of fiction, but of actual events and people. And just this is one of the most difficult tasks of writing. Unless the author is able to create this illusion, to make his characters and incidents live, he had better leave this type of treatment alone.

Revising the article: It is a good idea, once you are launched upon the writing of the first draft, to keep right at it until you are finished. After a writer gets into his story, he gets keyed up and writes with something of inspiration. This inspiration, this driving force should not be lost. So good advice is to keep right on writing. Do not bother at this stage to look after such details as the spelling of a word, the initials of a man quoted, or some exact figure not immediately at hand in your notes or material. All that can come later.

After the article has been written it needs to go through a "curing" process. In the first place, the facts of the story, the figures, names, dates, statistics, quotations, and spelling should be very carefully checked.

Then it will be well, time permitting, to put the story away for a few days, to let it "get cold." When the author is able to do this, he can reread the story with a perspective that he does not have when the story is coming hot from his typewriter. He

can go over it as a critic rather than as an author and can revise the manuscript to its advantage.

The writer should be "tough," "hard-boiled," when he revises his "stuff." That often means rewriting the lead or maybe throwing away what had seemed a clever lead and drafting a new one which better opens up the story. You may have to throw away part of what you have written, condense two pages into one paragraph to cut down the length, or enlarge a vital part. You may take the shears, physically, cut up your copy, and rearrange its divisions. As you work it over, you may change sentence structure, insert illuminating phrases, find a more suitable word.

The more experienced a writer is, the more likely he is to spend more and more time on this revision. Many a story that was mediocre in the first draft becomes a smoothly told, effective product after it has been worked over by an experienced hand. The novice, the hack, the lazy one, and the one who imagines that he was born with a heavenly gift of writing may think that he can turn out a well-rounded, finished article at the first draft, but not the experienced writer.

After the revision and the checking have all been done, then the final chore is to make a finished or final clean copy to send away. This, too, should be gone over at least twice before it is submitted. The final draft should be in good form. Necessary minor corrections may be made neatly between lines or in the margins, but the manuscript must be clear and plain, and neat. It is preferable for the writer to make this finished copy himself, even if not skilled in typewriting. It gives him another check on the manuscript.

If the student wishes to see how some of the most successful present-day writers work over and revise their copy, it will be of interest to look at the book "Breaking Into Print," edited by Elmer Adler and published by Simon and Schuster. This gives photographic reproduction of typical pages from actual manuscripts of about twenty leading writers of the day.

ASSIGNMENTS

The assignments in connection with this chapter should consist of the planning, outlining, and writing of as many feature articles as is feasible.