

BRUCE GILLESPIE

FEATURE WRITING

**FEATURES ARE NOT LONG
NEWS STORIES.**

Beleaguered Magazine Editor

TAKE A POINT OF VIEW.

Confused Reader

**WRITE A FEATURE LIKE
YOU'D TELL A JOKE.**

Insightful Stand-up Comic

**STRUCTURE A FEATURE
AS YOU WOULD AN ESSAY.**

Surprised English Professor

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

- ▶ INTRODUCTION
- ▶ THEME (THESIS)
- ▶ CONTEXT (BACKGROUND, HISTORY)
- ▶ ARGUMENT(S)
- ▶ COUNTER-ARGUMENT(S)
- ▶ CONCLUSION

**LIKE LOVE, FEATURE
REPORTING TAKES TIME.**

Mariah Carey

MEET SOME CHARACTERS.

Bored Reader

TRANSCRIBE EVERYTHING.

The Voice of Experience

LOOK FOR SCENES.

Exasperated Editor

REMAIN CONCISE.

Hard-Working Copyeditor

**KEEP CALM AND PREPARE
FOR REVISIONS.**

Every Features Editor Ever



BRUCE GILLESPIE
@BGILLESP

Wilfrid Laurier University

Feature Writing Notes

NASH 78 | January 7, 2016

1. Features are not long news stories

- news is meant to be quick and dirty. The inverted news pyramid insists that you give away all the good stuff right off the top, meaning most people don't read the rest of the story, let alone all the way to the end.
- news isn't meant to be entertaining or terribly engaging. It's functional. If news is the leftovers you throw in a bag for lunch, a feature is the meal you spend hours preparing for a date you're trying to impress.

2. Take a point of view

- news writing should not be driven by an opinion—that's not what news is for.
- features, which are longer, need a point of view to drive readers' interest in them.
- that doesn't mean they are necessarily personal—most are not.
- that doesn't mean they're based solely on an opinion. It has to be a reasoned, researched, supported take on a subject, not just whatever you feel about it.
- that also doesn't mean features are one-sided. We're still looking for journalistic balance, and you have to show a range of voices, opinions, points of view.

3. Write a feature like you'd tell a joke

- if you write a feature like a conventional news story, no one will read to the end. That's a terrible investment of your time and effort!
- as opposed to the inverted news pyramid, the conventional structure for features is a narrative one.
- master the conventional structure before you start playing around with other structures, which can be confusing to readers.
- narratives harken back to centuries-old storytelling techniques. They create suspense and engagement and there's a payoff for making it to the end, where all the threads are drawn together.

4. Structure a feature as you would an essay

- the time-tested conventional structure for an effective feature is the one you're used to using for a formal academic essay.
- Introduction, Thesis, Context/Background, Arguments, Counter-Argument(s), Conclusion.
- this is a handy guideline for structuring and organizing your research into a classic storytelling format that people will enjoy and understand.
- do not write your feature like an academic essay! This is *structural* guide only. Your feature should be written in a conversational, engaging manner.

5. Like love, feature reporting takes time

- the idea with a feature is to dig deep, tell a richer, more detailed, more thoughtful story than what we often find in the news.
- this means doing a lot of background reading on your subject—you want to be a pseudo-expert by the time you start interviewing real experts.

- keep your research well organized so that, weeks or months later, you can find the facts and details you half-remember easily and quickly.
- interview lots of people. Then, interview some more. Because you have the luxury of time, find the *best* sources, not just the first ones you come across.

6. Meet some characters

- in news stories, we want short quotes from the people we interview. We don't have the time or space to get to know them very well.
- a good feature almost always relies on at least one strong, well-rounded character. This is someone who has interesting anecdotes and experiences to share that help prove your theme/thesis.
- you need to spend significant amounts of time with them to build rapport, see how they live and get them to open up to you.

7. Transcribe everything

- because you have the luxury of time, transcribe all of your interviews. It's good practice for learning how to become a better interviewer, as painful as it is.
- having transcripts makes it easier to find good, interesting quotations later

8. Look for scenes

- one of the great things about feature writing is having the space to write what you see: scenes of people in action, doing things.
- don't just write about a protest—get in there, describe what you see, hear, smell and help bring it alive for the reader. Put her there with you in the middle of the action.
- don't fall for writing about the weather on the day of your interview or describing someone's hair or eye colour. If it has no bearing on the story, forget about it.

9. Remain concise

- more space doesn't mean you get a free pass for writing long, boring sentences.
- more space means more facts, details, descriptions. But your sentences still need to be spare, concise and keenly edited for maximum impact.

10. Keep calm and expect to be edited

- feature writing always involves revisions in a way that short, current news stories do not.
- expect to write and revise multiple drafts of a feature story. This is normal and almost always results in a better final product.

Bruce Gillespie, Associate Professor
Digital Media and Journalism | Wilfrid Laurier University
bgillespie@wlu.ca | @bgillesp | www.brucegillespie.com