

Writing the Non-Fiction Narrative as Feature Story

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Introduction

Students are writing more often. Part of each Pittsburgh public school student's responsibility every school year is to maintain a writing portfolio in English class. A portfolio contains each student's collection of reading, writing, speaking and viewing responses that include compositions from English class but can also include other academic or vocational classes each school year and two selections from the previous school year. In my experience most students are successful if they write about something or someone they know or about subjects of which they are curious. This may seem difficult at the brainstorming stage; the writing process is easier for students because they are writing about something they know. Most people are successful when writing about their experiences or of others. As human beings we can relate to their struggles, dilemmas, conflicts. By relating stories we not only understand others but also ourselves. One factor that ignites the student journalist is their curiosity about people's experiences. If they learn how to write well, the story will satisfy the reader's curiosity.

Writing incorporates narration, description and exposition. Students learn to write well to communicate ideas to an audience of their peers. Writing challenges a student's thinking at many levels. An expository work shows how well they understand what they read. In description it shows how well they observe the details of what they see. In narrative

writing it demonstrates how well they can tell a story. The urge to listen to a story is always welcome. People enjoy stories about others or themselves. Telling stories can take place at camp, at orientation, or as an anecdote to the beginning of a speech; telling a story is a natural form of communication. Every day we tell stories about ourselves and about others. Most of these stories are just a daily communication and exchange of information or our opinions. However, the feature writer's job is to tell a story to a wider audience.

Keeping the reader's attention involves many techniques. Students need to use description to create sight and sound images. They also need to use quotations to enliven the story. In addition, they need to compose this information in a coherent order that is understood by the audience. If using description, one could use spatial order. If using narration one could use chronological order or one can follow the straight news story's logical order or inverted pyramid style. Of course, the more advanced writer will also use various leads like suspended interest to draw the reader into the story.

Reading Hemingway's stories might help a student identify elements such as his short sentences and concise writing that contribute to the powerful images in his stories. Hemingway, it is said, was taught to be brief. By following the rules of the stylebook of The Kansas City Star newspaper during his days as a novice reporter, Hemingway learned to be brief. Since this year is the one hundredth anniversary of his birth, there is much information about Hemingway's style in newspapers and on the web.

Many students approach writing with trepidation. They will have to think or brainstorm for possible ideas their audience would like to read about. They will have to research possible ideas for facts and information. By reading widely they will prepare questions for their interviewees and have sufficient knowledge to conduct an interview. Telling someone what you have to say is often easier than writing what you have to say in a story. Much that goes into gathering information takes time and planning. Much revision goes into writing. Student reporters will apply what they know about the subject; content and the grammar, mechanics, and spelling they will need to meet a deadline.

The narrative is the most natural writing form to begin with because telling a story is a personal experience. The order usually begins with a surprise and then reaches a climax -- much like a fictional story (introduction, body, and conclusion). Everyone can think of a true story that has happened to him or her. That story could include a dilemma they faced, a turning point in their lives or some experience that revealed a message to themselves about their own character. Some of the incidents may be humorous and others may reveal pathos about life. In many cases that same story has happened to others. We as readers identify and/or empathize with the subject. We learn to tell our story and listen to the story of others. We learn we have common experiences and that life is a series of conflicts and actions that make up life's experiences.

As a child grows he experiences many events at home, at school, and with peers. He develops an ability to see an incident as an experience that is real and a record or memory of his life. The experience of being an athlete, cast member of a play, or camp member provides students with enriching life experiences whether disappointing or first-rate.

Of all forms of writing, narrative is the most popular today. From memoirs to biographies to feature stories, people like to be entertained by reading about other people. The challenge is to think of ideas the student audience is interested in reading. The focus should include more stories about students, their life experiences at school, the experiences of those people whom they admire. Rather than being passive readers they are invited to become active participants of life via the stories they write. They will focus on a story that is clearly theirs. Its components will include conflict and choices and stories the student, athlete or hobbyist can relate to. In addition, it will enlighten those who might just be interested in the issues human beings face at school, on the field or within a club or organization.

Unit Objectives

The primary objective of this unit is to demonstrate the process of how to write an in depth feature story of 500-700 words based on a topic that is newsworthy and educational for a student audience.

The feature story. By writing a feature, students will undergo the process of writing a factual story that entertains the audience by using fictional techniques such as description, quotations and narration. The student journalist will compose an entertaining story using facts. From researching the subject, to observing the subject, to interviewing the subject and composing a story that entails the techniques of a good narrative: description, dialogue and action, writing one's own story would give each student a sense of ownership and success. The unit emphasizes the writing process from brainstorming to the final written composition.

Students not only will read factual narratives, they will also write factual narratives. As writers they will work in small groups to peer edit and consult each other on the progress of their stories. Jim Davidson stressed using the feature story as a way to engage student reporters to write about their communities, schools, homes and lives. All of my students want to write stories because they elected to enroll in a journalism class. They need to learn how to write. Writing a feature that captures the reader's attention is a challenge. Collaborating with other students about feature story ideas and a feature page layout is a great motivation for young writers. If you teach journalism, English or social studies you can use this unit. It combines the writing process and the elements of non-fiction journalism with narrative story telling techniques.

Section Outline

This unit begins with a discussion of feature writing. It covers the types of feature stories, the parts of a feature story, and the length of a 500 hundred-word feature story. Students will read feature stories in print and discuss which feature stories they read. They will identify those stories they like the best and what techniques the author used to tell the feature story. The teacher will also provide additional stories. This section should be useful to an English teacher who is teaching non-fiction narrative via autobiography, biography, memoirs, travel journals, or personality profiles. It should be useful to a social studies teacher who has students doing witness to history type narratives or genealogical research.

The next section will entail writing a feature story. Students will prepare to do their homework on a subject. Gathering information via print or electronic sources or suggestions from friends, teachers or family will provide students with enough research or homework with which to conduct an interview.

By role-playing various interview scenarios, students will present good and bad interviews and study techniques to get the most information from the subject. Students will prepare questions they are to ask. They will practice by interviewing each other. They will practice by writing news stories where interviews are sources of information.

Students will learn the techniques of listening. Timing and time are essential components in an interview. Given a set time to interview and a deadline, students must learn to ask questions that their readers want to know. In addition, they will learn how to keep their subject to the point of the question without the interviewee talking ad nauseam about one point for the whole interview.

Students will then compose their stories using the narrative order. They will write their stories with an emphasis on sensory images and quotations, paying attention to the lead and various fictional techniques. We will attempt to edit text by identifying common problems with content and with grammar such as subject and verb agreement and the students' own writing.

The final copy will be proofread for spelling, mechanics and grammar. In teams of three to five, students will work through the writing process acting as editors and audience for each other's writing. That process will take students from brainstorming, through information gathering, through writing initial drafts to final copy and editing and then proofreading all text for possible publication. To coordinate this team approach, students will have rubrics that cite requirements for each feature story. Those components include a specific topic in the lead, a coherent order or arrangement of ideas in the body, and a conclusion. Each team will have two to three students read their copy for the first draft and one proofreader for the final copy.

Student journalists should only attempt the feature story after they have cut their teeth on news briefs and news stories. The feature story encompasses more description and

depth than the news story. In addition, students should have reviewed style rules and the copyediting process before embarking on the writing of the feature story.

Features

One primary purpose of a feature story is to educate. Like news stories they are factual and require reporting. Unlike news stories, the form and style of a feature is written with what is appropriate to the content and purpose of the story. They follow the order of introduction, body and conclusion like most fiction. They are well organized and entail a novelty lead rather than the standard summary news lead. They depend upon the writer applying his imagination to the facts, yet they are not fiction. They apply all of the principles of effective writing to achieve unity, coherence and emphasis. They use specific nouns, adjectives and verbs to create vivid images, sounds and feelings for the reader.

The types of feature stories include the following: news-feature; informative feature; personality sketches; personal experience or accomplishment story; human-interest story.

Writing the in-depth feature story

Writing the feature story demands intellectual curiosity. One must be willing to investigate the story from every angle before starting to write the story behind the story. Interviewing others about the subject is another way to tell the story. In literature a character description entails a physical description, a list of the character's deeds and words, and what others say about the character. So be it with the feature subject. Student reporters should ask themselves "Who has a stake in this story?" and seek their views.

Coming up and brainstorming ideas for the feature should not be too difficult. Students only have to look at teen periodicals or observe what's happening in the school cafeteria. Since Allderdice High School has such a great history some of my students could interview celebrity alumni such as Iris Rainer Dart, novelist, or Curtis Martin, professional football player. Adults are often delighted when young people ask for interviews. People who are outstanding in their fields of endeavor are great subjects for students to write about. One often wonders how they made it.

Listening and observing the subject

Determine the dominant impression of your subject as seen through the eyes and ears of others. Describe the setting. Describe the person's physical appearance and features -- voice, height. An example might be "The coach stood six-feet and seven inches. It is no wonder that he commands his team's respect."

Conducting the Interview

The interview is conducted with a person whose life style or accomplishments are of potential interest to the public. Make an appointment in advance by telephone and arrange a time and place for the interview.

Prepare for the interview by understanding your assignment. A student reporter should ask why the interview is timely and why this person is interesting and is interesting now rather than last year. What's the news peg? Learn as much as possible about the interviewee, position, accomplishment, opinions, likes and dislikes, and personality. From the person's friends and acquaintances, previous publicity references to Who's Who and Current Biography, magazine articles, books and on web pages one can read much background information. Learn about the topic. Interviewees respect people who are knowledgeable about their subject and more likely to speak freely. Consult the New York Times Index and Internet. Read enough information so you can talk intelligently about the topic.

Draw up a list of questions of local interest. Avoid embarrassing questions and yes or no. Open-ended questions are good for the end of the interview. The reporter might ask, "Have we missed anything?" This gives the interviewee an opportunity to underline points or pursue a topic the interview missed. Ask questions that will deliver desired information.

Plan an approach to the interviews. Observe interview programs like Tim Russert's Meet the Press.

Composing the story

The student must write the story as soon as he or she finishes the interview. Evaluate the notes and include the most interesting and important material. Since most of the features will be about people, let the interviewee reflect his/her personality. Describe the subject as you observed them. A coach could be described at a practice session. A teacher could be described at his or her desk in the classroom. The same viewing can go for the student. What is the setting for the interview? Where have you the reporter observed them and talked to them. Try to be original. Think of the interviewee's most dominant impression; this will determine how you write the story.

The lead should describe or set the scene unless the interviewee has come up with an ingenious quotation. The transition between the lead and next paragraph should be bridged carefully. Support the lead with the body of the story. Arrange the body with alternating paragraphs of direct and indirect quotations or summarizing statements. For elaboration of points of emphasis or forceful or colorful language, use the indirect for summarizing passages.

Editing first copy

Correct all grammatical errors and awkward sentences. Edit for accuracy of facts by checking notes for numerical data such as dates. Check all names and spellings. Follow the rules of copyediting in your style manual or grammar book. Do not correct direct quotations of the source.

Publication

Proofread your feature story for content and grammar, mechanical and spelling errors. Set up a horizontal modular layout that includes a headline and photo if possible. Proofread all text including copy, cutlines, and headlines.

Week 1

Read feature stories assigned from your class textbook. Read issues of old school newspapers on microfilm in the school library. They are dated from 1927 to 1993. In each story identify the points that make the feature story unique. Cite the order used in this story. Identify the type of lead that was used. Look at how quotations and paraphrases are alternated in the body of the feature story. Is there any description of the person's unique mannerisms or characteristics?

Select one story from the Post-Gazette. Tell the class why you selected this particular feature story. Identify the techniques the writer used to compel you to read the story. What do you think is the underlying message? Is the story newsworthy? Does it contain a human-interest element? Is it timely and does it involve conflict or consequence as news values in what way? Discuss these stories in small groups. Propose the best feature for the whole group or class. Elect a leader to present an explanation of this particular feature story.

Week 2

Begin gathering information for your feature story. Use the Internet in the library for your research. For print sources use the school yearbook or school newspapers in the library. Try to gather as much information about the person or subject as you can from print and electronic sources.

Begin to write questions that your readers would want to know. Plan to get as many questions completed as possible. Use a single notebook devoted to this particular story. Plan and practice with a partner in class.

Student actors will demonstrate a bad formal interview for the class. Students will list all of the don'ts of the interview such as not setting up an appointment in advance or not having questions prepared in advance. They will cite what is wrong. That checklist would include the following: preparedness and knowledge of the subject, tablet and pen, setting a time limit on getting all questions, checking name spelling and title and other facts about the person.

Student actors will role-play a good formal interview for the class. Students will list the entire do's of a good interview. They will cite what was correct and why the interviewer will be successful in gathering information for the feature story. A person should succeed with knowledge and information about the subject and with professional conduct. Other staff ignores students who lack seriousness of purpose and who are late or casual often. They lack credibility. Nobody wants to talk to a reporter who does not get the facts straight.

Try to conduct the interview in person rather than by phone. Arrange for a time and place to conduct your interview. Gather as much information about the subject as possible. In some cases you may want to follow the person through a school day or

practice, if the interviewee is a subject of your story. Athletes, drama student, et cetera.
Observation of the person at work; derive a good description for your story.

Week 3

Conduct the interview. Write your story as soon after the interview as is possible. Construct the story in a conventional introduction, body and conclusion order. The lead and the story should reveal the subject's character via description and observation and quotations via interviews.

Interview others about your subject--coaches, teachers, other students if that is applicable to your story. Remember that what the interviewee says and does reveals character and by what others say about. Ask: What is the theme of the story? What is the dominant impression the reporter wants to leave?

Once you have written the lead, provide enough details and information in the body to tell a story about the subject or issue. Describe the subject in physical terms to the audience, especially if height or voice or other things have an impact on the story.

Week 4

Write the story and edit it. Have two students peer edit the story for its interest. Check the lead, body and conclusion. Correct errors in sentence structure. Revise and polish the story for grammar, style, tone. Do we get a visual portrait of the person at work and an honest response in their interview with you?

Two weeks later

Place your story in columns of two inches, twelve point Times Roman. Shoot a photo of your subject yourself or get a student photographer to get a shot of the subject in motion or posed. Use a horizontal modular layout. Include a headline that uses a subject and verb. Present your group's layout to the class on poster board that measures 10 1/4 by 16-inches deep. What you will change in the future to better prepare yourself?

Student Bibliography

The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual, Sixth Trade Edition.
Addison- Wesley, New York, 1996

By-line: Ernest Hemingway. Selected Articles and Dispatches of Four Decades,
William White, editor. Scribner, New York, 1967.

Cappon, Rene J. *The Associated Press Guide to News Writing; A Handbook for Writers
from America's Leading News Service*, Macmillan, New York, 1991

Features: A View from the Poets' Corner, pp. 115-136

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Press, Ames, Iowa, 1984

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Chapter 7 ~ "Writing feature stories", pp. 61-74

Chapter 18 ~ "Reading proof" ~ pp. 217-229

Harwood, William N. *Writing and Editing School News*, 2nd edition Clark Pub. Co.,
Caldwell, Idaho, 1983

Unit 4 ~ "Writing Leads", ~ pp. 29-38

Unit 8 ~ "Writing Feature Stories", ~ pp. 67-78

Moyes, Norman. *Journalism*, Ginn, Lexington, Mass., 1984

Chapter 8 ~ "Interviewing", ~ pp. 166-190

Chapter 10 ~ "Writing Feature Stories", ~ pp. 204-231

Speaking of Journalism. Twelve Writers and Editors Talk about Their Work, William
Zinsser et al. Harper Collins, New York, 1994

Warriner, John E. *English Grammar and Composition*, Complete course. Franklin
edition Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982.

Chapter 23 ~ "Making Writing Interesting", ~ pp. 389-414

Part Three: "Composition: Sentence Structure" chapters 11-20, pp. 197-317

Welty, Eudora. *One Writer's Beginnings*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.,
1984

Writers INC; *A Student Handbook for Writing and Learning*, Heath, Lexington, Mass.,
1966

~ "Personal Writing: Writing from Within" ~ Pp. 276-293

Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well; An informal guide to writing nonfiction*, 2nd edition.
Harper & Row, New York. 1980

Zinsser, William. *Writing to Learn*, Harper & Row, New York. 1988

Creative Nonfiction, Lee Gutkind, editor.

Newspaper feature stories from The New York Times, The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Pittsburgh Tribune-Review. Contrast feature stories on the same subject in various newspapers. Study obituaries on famous people as an example of contrasting styles.

The Foreword feature stories Of the great American novelists many began as journalists. Students can read short stories of the following authors/journalists whose stories are cited in various anthologies:

Crane, Stephen, *The Open Boat*

O. Henry, *The Furnished Room*

Willa Cather, *Neighbor Rosick; Paul's Case*

Ernest Hemingway, *By the Water of Babylon*

Journalism I

Feature Story Check off

news-feature

informative feature

personality sketch

personal experience or accomplishment story

human interest

Primarily educates/entertains

Factual reporting

Form/style are appropriate to content of story

Original idea/treatment

Well-organized

Novelty lead

Uses devices of the fiction writer: suspense, surprise, dialogue, description, quotation, narration, and climax.

Writer applies his imagination to the facts, yet they are not fiction.

Feature is written with friendly simplicity--easy to read prose.

Principles of effective writing apply to unity, coherence, and emphasis.

Specific nouns, adjectives, and verbs create vivid images, sounds and feelings for the reader.

Brings reader close to the experience or idea of the story via the following ways:

- episodes and anecdotes

- quotation marks very early in the story

- uses third person

uses "you" when possible to bear the subject in upon the reader as a matter of urgency but is consistent

- makes ideas concrete uses specific figures and illustrations that readers understand

uses dialogue and local color, characterizations, and appeals to the senses, including visual imagery--lets readers see, hear, taste, or feel

what happened

- keeps paragraphs short

- uses long and short sentences but not arbitrarily

- rounds out the article by linking up the conclusion with the beginning

Writer's name _____

Title of Paper _____ Date _____

Narrative Essay Evaluation

Peer Evaluator _____

Dichotomous Scale 1 (poor), 2 (average), 3 (very good), 4 (excellent), 5 (superior)

Read the story and evaluate the narrative according to the following criteria:

1. The story makes a specific point that is stated or strongly implied.
1 2 3 4 5
 2. Details are based on who, what, when, where, why, and how questions. Are details with nature of the story, the writer's purpose, and the audience in mind. Irrelevant details left out?
1 2 3 4 5
 3. The story is well paced and doesn't drag.
1 2 3 4 5
 4. Events are arranged chronologically--with or without flashback. Is the story arranged in a logical, understandable time sequence?
1 2 3 4 5
 5. The writer uses dialogue to advance the story, bring out important point, add liveliness.
1 2 3 4 5
 6. Is this story of interest to you (audience)?
1 2 3 4 5
 7. Overall rating
1 2 3 4 5
- 35- 32 A 28-31 B 24-27 C 21-23 D

Comments: _____

Journalism 1

copy editing, layout and design of a school newspaper

edit and proof copy
elements that make up a blank page
elements of page design
mock page plans
determining length of copy/page, size of art, heads, etc.

DESIGN A FEATURE PAGE LAYOUT WITH YOUR GROUP

You will need all of the following:

good, proofed, factual, accurate and interesting stories
beautiful, big pictures that tell a human interest story
headlines that advertise the page
folios to indicate page number, pub. name, date
dummy page plans

Are you ready to lay out? Do five small sketches of your pages.

Indicate headlines with xxxx's. Indicate art with a diagonal

Show direction in which copy flows down and up and across columns on your page.

Does your page have visual impact? Is it just all black? Is it all text.

Are stories concise and not wordy? Did you eliminate widows?

Are the people in your pictures big and beautiful or the size of tip of your little finger?

Faces should be as large as a dime or a quarter.

Are they clear and in focus?

You will get approximately 35-40 words per column inch. A column inch is 12 picas wide (two inches) by one inch deep. There are five columns on a Foreword page. How many column inches is that if each column is 16-inches deep?