***FEATURE WRITING***

**WHAT’S A FEATURE? THE BASIC SCOOP:**

A news feature goes way deeper than the headlines – it explores an issue thoroughly. To write one requires plenty of research and interviewing. Yes, it takes some honest toil to create something worthwhile, but it’s fun – especially once you see the result of all that hard work.

**TYPES OF FEATURES:**

• Human interest features

• News features

• Personality profiles

• Personal experience narratives

• How-to-Stories

• Brites

• Historical features

**EXAMPLE OF BRITES:**

Ready, aim, bake! Joe Carle of Westland called police Sunday night after he heard gunshots hitting his house. He told police someone was shooting from outside. But police found Carle, 31, had placed a loaded semiautomatic handgun in his oven that night, forgot it was there, then turned on the oven. The gun warmed up and fired bullets through the oven into the kitchen walls. No one was hurt. Police didn’t know why Carle put the gun in the oven.

**WHAT TO FEATURE IN A FEATURE?**

Features can run up to 10,000 words in length. Even if your story is only one tenth as long (YPP features tend to be from 1000-1500 words in length), it’s important to have a clear idea of what you are going to write about – and what specific angle you will explore – as you get started.

**GENERATING FEATURE STORY IDEAS**

1. Start with your own experience

2. Community you are part of

3. Read the papers and listen to newscast

4. Clip saving

5. Fact files: who, what, where, etc

6. History

7. Hobbies 8. Dreams: nearly everyone wants to be rich.

9. How and why behind a news event

**Story mapping can keep you from wasting a lot of time doing research that you won’t be able to** use. Here’s an example of how to focus a feature by using the technique of story mapping. We’ll look at raves once again: You love raves, and want to do a story on them. OK, cool, you’ve got your initial idea. But what exactly are you going to write about? For every general story idea, there are many angles, or ways the story can be handled. For instance, a story about raves could address the drugs, the venues, the music, the dangers, the police, parents, the rave culture, clothing, trends…the list goes on and on. If you try to cover everything, you will have zero focus. Without a clear angle, the likely result after lots of hard work will be one big mush!

**Narrow your idea down to a few main sub-topics. Choose sub-topics that relate logically, and** you will find it easier to focus your story. For example, to write a feature on raves, you might choose to focus on drugs, recent trends and music. Your next step is to brainstorm as many angles as you can within each sub-topic, the same way you did the main story idea. What possible details are there to touch upon? Break down drugs: The physical effects, the peer pressure, the prices, the quality, the testing process, bad trips, the potential for dying, for getting busted. Break down trends: What’s cool in the scene and what’s not? What’s the future? Are raves becoming too trendy? Is there a dominant style? How do trends relate to the kinds of drugs people take? Break down music: What’s hot? What’s not? What are the different styles and scenes? What kind of equipment is used? Who are famous DJs? What is house? Techno? Happy Hardcore? Trance… Based on the angles you come up with, decide what the main angle for your story is. Suddenly, you have an interesting story about raves waiting to happen. It’s straightforward, and will be relatively easy to write because you know where you want to go, and what types of information you need to take you there.

**What’s next?**

As always, you need to become an expert in your subject. Go out and get the information. You will need to do some research on the net or in a library, talk to people on the phone and set up your key face-to-face interviews.

A reporter has to hustle to get their facts straight. Find a DJ to profile and set up an interview. Go to some raves, check out the trends; what are people wearing and taking? Take notes. Go to rave wear stores and get prices. Figure out how to talk to some designers. What are the latest rumors about drugs? Who’s doing what and why? Make sure you interview some ravers so you can ground your story through their first-hand voices. Youth journalists should strive to represent youth perspectives as often as possible. The entire time you are doing your research,

**REMEMBER TO KEEP YOUR FOCUS**. Keep asking yourself what information you really need. When you get extra information (which you most certainly will), don’t get bogged down and distracted by it. If you stay true to your focus, you will spend your time and energy doing research efficiently. Once you’ve got all the information you need to cover your chosen angles, and then transcribe your tapes (if you record interviews) and notebooks.

**IT’S TIME TO WRITE!** Are you ready to get funky? Features are the crown jewel of news stories, where you can use colorful language and have some freedom to express yourself. Whereas hard news stories concentrate on the facts – just the facts – news features blast past those limitations. This is where you get to show off and be creative as a writer. Test your limits; push your use of language and your ability to set a scene. You are the Storyteller now. There’s no one right way to write, and there’s no single best way for you to tell your story, so trust yourself…insist on coming up with an original and effective approach. The more work you put into story development and research, the more you can go with the flow of your notes when you actually sit down and write the feature.

Try to make your reader feel like they are there. Your writing can trigger all five senses! You can think of a feature story as a series of mental images, presented one after the other. If these scenes are developed thoughtfully, creatively and skilfully, they can come together in extraordinary ways to create a beautiful montage. Consider the story about raves. A great feature will put the reader INSIDE the club, next to the DJ (what does s/he looks like, smell like, sound like…does s/he wear their headphones crooked on their head, or around their neck), in the mind of a 17 year-old taking “E,” make them feel the music washing over the swaying crowd, connect the trends they learned about with the outfits of the dancers gyrating by.

**What’s the point of your story?**

In a feature, you have some room to develop your ideas and your characters (much like in a play or a short story). You don’t have to start with a lead that summarizes the whole piece. If you create a vivid atmosphere for your readers, it can be very effective to have your characters narrate the story from within that scene. Say the rave story starts off right in the heart of a club: the lights, the beats, the gear, the heat, and the turntables. The description ends with the turntables, and the DJ takes over telling the story in one’s own words. By sharing some details about other aspects of the club, and quoting other ravers and DJs, the whole feature can unfold within the atmosphere of the party. Just be sure that whatever approach you use allows you to stay with the initial idea and main sub-topics. Your role as a feature writer is that of narrator. You take all the pieces of information that you’ve assembled and decide how to put them together. Build a complete jigsaw puzzle, using your own perspective to envision and then assess the final result. Remember that your opinions shouldn’t enter a feature story. You are there to fairly and accurately represent different people, and to let the reader draw their own conclusions about who and what to believe.

**FEATURE LEADS:**

1. Question lead: – Is it better to buy new or used textbooks? – Should the death penalty be abolished? – Do birds aim?

2. Direct address: – Would you like free season football tickets – and a ride to the stadium? – Tired of smoky cafes, sleazy pickup lines and stale pretzels? Then try the newest single scene: cyberspace

3. Quotations: At the end it was Cassie who told her mother not to cry. “I had started to cry,” Angela said, “and Cassie looked at me and said, ‘Don’t cry, Mother, even when I die, don’t cry,’ and then she went quietly to sleep.” -Lexington Herald-Leader

4. Anecdotes: Gretchen Brown, president and chief executive officer of Hospice of the Bluegrass, remembers the well-intentioned but confused college student who called her one day. “I asked him, ‘Do you know what hospice is?’ and he said, ‘Oh, that's where they kill people.’”

5. Allusion: At the Berks County jail, crime doesn’t pay. The inmates do: $ 10 a day for room and board – no credit cards accepted. -Wall Street Journa

6. Contrast: VU Richard Roy Grant was, by all appearance, a life insurgence agent, a beloved husband and stepfather, a kind neighbour, a caring friend. He was also a burglar, whose speciality was breaking into the homes of high school athletes while their families were away, watching their sons play football. Associated Press

7. Descriptive leads: Every day the factory whistle bellowed forth its shrill, roaring, trembling noises into the smoke begrimed and greasy atmosphere of the workingmen's suburb; and obedient to the summons of the power of steam, people poured out of little grey houses into the street. With somber faces they hastened forward like frightened roaches, their muscles stiff from insufficient sleep. In the chill morning twilight, they walked through the narrow, unpaved street to the tall stone cage that waited for them to welcome the people with deafening sounds floated about--the heavy whir of machinery, the dissatisfied snort of steam. Stern and somber, the black chimneys stretched their huge, thick sticks high above the village. No mercy

**REVISION AND EDITING**

Always reread your work. Read it out loud; read it as if you have no knowledge of the subject; pretend you are a critical editor seeing it for the first time; pretend you are one of your targeted readers. Do your own grammar and spell check. If possible, let it sit for a couple days and then read it again. This is the beauty of revision: you’ll be amazed by all the improvements you can make when you look at it with a fresh perspective. Also, consider printing it out and reading it as printed text, because things read differently on paper than they do on screen. It sucks to have words that you sweated and slaved over deleted with the click of a button, but editing – and cutting in particular – almost always has to happen. Though you need to try and edit yourself as ruthlessly as possible, it’s almost impossible to have an editor’s perspective when you are the author. It helps to hear someone else suggest what passages they think aren’t crucial, what sentences need to be tightened up, where there’s clutter that can be eliminated. It can be incredibly hard to see your writing cut up, but that, after all, is why editors exist. The lesson to be learned when it comes to dealing with editors is to cultivate a thick skin. To master the craft of writing you have to discipline yourself to hear criticism without construing it as a personal attack. If your piece of writing is too long (as most are, once you’re trying to squeeze into a word count allotted to you by a publication), then something has to be cut, you may not like it, but you have to accept it. Of course, you must struggle to find a balance; as the author you are ultimately responsible for keeping the heart of your story intact…alive…vibrant! So you can’t accept every suggested revision, but you also can’t stake your feelings to every sentence you’ve ever written. Not if you want to be a published writer. When your piece appears in print, don’t be surprised if you find changes have been made to your story that you’ve never seen. Again, don’t take it personally when your work is revised. Sometimes it’s done to better suit the style of the publication. Sometimes it’s minor grammar alterations. And sometimes there’s such major cutting, pasting and rewording that it’s hard to recognize your story anymore. When this happens, don’t scream and threaten your editor. Calmly express your concerns at an appropriate time, and if the editor isn’t willing to accommodate you and you don’t want it to happen again, don’t submit anything else to that publication.

**STORY GENERATION: BRAINSTORMING**

There are many stages to writing a story for a newspaper, and a good reporter is good at shifting gears as they tackle the different kinds of work required. Doing research and conducting interviews calls for a left-brained mind like a steel trap, tracking details and thinking very rationally. However, before you reach that stage of the game, you should already have tapped into the right side of your brain and made good use of your creativity.