

MAGAZINE

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Writers

Jacob Manual | Fahad Fasil
Fathima Sithara | Mubaraq iman
Suhail Fareed | Musthara Mohammad

This is

Magazine

Magazine is the treasured photographic magazine that chronicled the 20th Century. It now lives on at LIFE.com, the largest, most amazing collection of professional photography on the internet.

Written by:

[Ahmed](#)

[Nahla](#)

[Mohamed](#)

Table of Contents

[Intro chapter \(Ahmed\)](#)

Chapters

[1- Feature Writing Today \(Mohamed\)](#)

[2- Careers as Feature Writers and Editors \(Ahmed\)](#)

[3- Finding Good Feature Article Ideas \(Nahla\)](#)

Book Intro

Written by:

[Ahmed](#)

MAGAZIN

This book discusses feature writing. Features are a large part of what people read in their newspapers, magazines, and newsletters, and this book tries to guide motivated writers down the right path. It emphasizes writing values that will strengthen the reader's journalistic practices. The purpose of this fifth edition is the same as that of the original, second, third, and fourth editions: to give advanced writers and reporters a thorough look at newspaper, magazine, newsletter, and online feature writing. To fully appreciate its contents, readers need an introduction to writing and reporting for newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and online publications before starting this book. An advanced student should find it filled with good advice for writing different types of features. The book offers lists of tips, observations, and guidelines for writers. Similarly, lists of sources and story ideas are often offered in each chapter. To accomplish these goals, the book required many sources of information. It is a collection of a wide variety of perspectives and experiences of the author and other experienced writers, editors, publishers, and professors. This volume should be a solid tour of the different forms and approaches to feature writing. There are several points to note about the book. First, the book is geared to advanced student writers and beginning professionals. Readers should have a foundation in writing basics from beginning writing and reporting classes to get the most from this material. There are no exercises or other classroom activities. Students are expected to practice their feature writing and reporting in the world around them while working on fresh assignments that can lead to publication in their campus

news

media outlets or in other publications. Second, this book focuses on newspaper, magazine, newsletter, and online publications with emphasis on daily newspapers and consumer magazines.

This latest edition emphasizes three primary aspects of feature writing: (1) introduction and writing skills or basics; (2) article types; and (3) the collegiate and professional writing

life. In each chapter, you will learn from the narrative, from the advice of professionals, and

by example. In each chapter, there are excerpts and complete articles from some of the nation's

leading publications that illustrate points made in the text. Although most of the examples in

this edition are new, a handful of the very best examples written by award-winning journalists

from the first three editions have been retained.

I have taken much of the material here from 33-plus years of feature writing and reporting

classes at three different universities, but most comes from my time as a faculty member at the

University of Miami. I also add 6 years of full-time reporting and editing experience at daily

newspapers, including 3 years as an entertainment beat writer and music reviewer. I spent more

than a year launching and editing an international subscription newsletter, Money Laundering

Alert, several years of freelance writing for magazines and newspaper travel sections, and a

decade of editing special features projects and sections for daily and weekly newspapers in South

Florida. I hope you will learn as much from it as I did putting it all together.

Chapter 1

Feature Writing Today

Written by:

[Mohamed](#)

Feature Writing Today

Danielle McNally is typical of young feature writers working for magazines these days. She had recently graduated from college with a journalism degree and was looking for a job in the magazine industry. McNally, originally from St. Petersburg, FL, headed for New York City, the center of magazine publishing in the United States, just weeks after she finished school. Armed with an internship at a national magazine and considerable experience as the founding editor of her undergraduate campus magazine at the University of Miami, she had high hopes of finding work and beginning her climb up the editorial ladder to write for, and eventually edit, a national magazine.

Her big step was an internship between her junior and senior years at a New York magazine. She explained:

In the summer of 2007, I was chosen as the American Society of Magazine Editors (ASME) intern at Food & Wine. The experience I garnered from this internship was invaluable. First of all, it gave me a first-person look at the dynamism that occurs as a major national magazine comes together. I experienced an energy and a work-style and schedule that I had not yet encountered at my previous internships with regional magazines in Miami or in my school work. I was able to partake in all aspects of magazine production from the very initial stages of research to conceptualizing the design and photography elements to fact-checking

and

copy-editing. My personal responsibilities consisted mostly of assisting and conducting research

for my supervising editor, but I was also able to write my own pieces for the magazine's website. These included a Q&A interview with a well-known New York sommelier, a sidebar

on organic charitable initiatives, and a blog about the premier of food-themed movie, No Reservations.

After finishing her internship, she returned to her senior year and became the moving force

toward creation of a new campus magazine hosted by her school's journalism program.

"I took

the managerial aspects of producing a magazine that I learned at Food & Wine (scheduling,

organization, interaction between departments) and brought that back with me to the University of Miami and my new endeavor, Distraction," McNally (personal

communication to author,

September 3, 2008) explained.

Working on Distraction was the best learning experience I had in college. I had never before

been an editor. Although I had worked with my peers on group projects and stories with multiple

writers, I had never had to be in charge of such a large group or to make so many varied, important decisions. Managing my peers was both challenging and educational.

Suddenly I had to

consider not just my own writer's perspective on a story, but also the personality and focus of the

magazine and its audience. I had to consider style, fit and design when editing a story.

As feature

writers, we often only think about how we believe the story should be told. We focus only on the

words. But as an editor, I had to consider both the writer's point of view and the magazine's,

which in turn made me a much better writer. As writers, especially when pitching ideas to editors,

we should consider all the aspects of the story's final product. For features, writers should submit

their own suggestions for sidebars, heads and decks, captions for photos and ways to package the story. I also learned how important it was for a writer to pay attention to the parameters the editor has given. Numerous times while editing Distraction I received stories more than three times the assigned word length or in a voice completely opposite of what my staff and I had envisioned when planning the story. This was extremely frustrating. However, I still had to cut and edit my peers' stories. After the magazine came out, some writers were upset at the changes made to the stories they had written. This was one of the more difficult parts of editing Distraction. However, by the second issue, I used this to better explain to writers what was expected. Through all the editing I did, it actually helped me become a much better writer.

McNally and her staff wrote and produced two issues of the new magazine before school ended that year. McNally was then quite lucky to find work in the magazine industry in Manhattan so quickly after graduation. But her preparation as a student made a big difference and got editors to notice her.

I started my job hunt during the spring semester of my senior year, sending cover letters to contacts I had made during my time in New York previously and going on informational interviews. In an effort to get my foot in the door at as many magazines as possible, I spent one afternoon at Barnes & Noble going through the masthead of every magazine that interested me. I took down the name of the executive editor (or a comparable position) and sent each of those people a copy of my cover letter, resume, Distraction, and a handful of other clips. While this did help me secure more interviews (and I would definitely suggest this to other job-hunters), I actually got my job with a little bit of luck.

Upon arriving in New York, I attended a reunion for ASME alums. There my

internship coordinator introduced me to an alumna from a few years previous, Tracy Saelinger, who was working on the launch of a new food magazine, Food Network Magazine. He felt I would be a good fit for the publication because of my experience at Food & Wine. The next day I sent my resume to Tracy and she called me for an interview later that week. A few days after that, the Editor in Chief, Mile Carpenter, called to offer me the job. Using my network and connections, as well as previous experience in the specific field and genre I wanted to enter, combined to land me the job. I have really enjoyed my time at Food Network Magazine thus far. Since it is a launch, the staff is very small (only 8 people on the edit side, including interns), and I have been given quite a bit of responsibility. I have a lot of administrative duties as the assistant to the editor in chief. But I am also lucky enough to have my own stories to write and pages to edit; I work on production, and participate in tons of research and creative content development. I edit the basic Front of Book pages, including the masthead and star index. But I also have written short newsy pieces and market descriptions for our holiday gift guide. My written involvement has increased with the second issue, and they have selected several of the ideas I pitched for inclusion in future issues. I think one of the great things about this job is that it gives me the opportunity to move into larger responsibilities more quickly than I would be allowed at an established magazine with a fuller staff.

Her magazine is new. She was on staff for two months before it published the first issue. “Food Network Magazine is a joint venture between Hearst Publications and the Food Network. I feel like this project was meant for me,” she explained (personal communication to author, September 19, 2008).

My experience as an intern at Food & Wine last summer, then launching Distraction last year, combined to prepare me for this exact magazine! Distraction was certainly a huge help in securing this job. Since it is a launch, the staff is very small (only eight people on the editorial side, including interns), and I have been given quite a bit of responsibility. In addition to acting as the assistant to the editor in chief, I have my own stories to write, pages to edit, work on production, and participate in tons of research and creative content development.

McNally also finds time to freelance.

Additionally, I have been doing free-lance reporting for People magazine in my spare time. I have less and less of that (spare time) as my work load at Food Network Magazine becomes heavier, but it has been good experience to see how reporting is handled at a weekly as well.

Like McNally or any other young professional feature writer or magazine staff member, it will take large amounts of time and considerable effort to succeed. You have to ask yourself some tough questions about your abilities. For example, could you write a definitive discussion of cloning procedures and related ethical issues for U.S. News & World Report? Or could you write a profile of the hottest new East Coast political leader for The New Yorker or The New Republic? Or a new film star for People? Can you prepare a compelling article about babies suffering from cancer for Family Circle? Or could you write a highly descriptive and entertaining piece about the nightlife on South Beach in Miami Beach for Ocean Drive? Could you write a guide to the best mountain hiking trails for Condé Nast Traveler or a human interest

article about grandchildren in *Modern Maturity*? Could you write a travel feature focusing on finding bargain airfares in the *Chicago Tribune* Sunday edition?

Is this over your head? Probably. For now, perhaps.

Give yourself time. Find your own level. Maybe you could write a short review of the newest Lindsay Lohan movie in your campus newspaper or even your local newspaper's weekend or entertainment sections. Maybe you could write a humorous column for your campus newspaper or a campus-based World Wide Web site, or perhaps you could prepare a holiday

story about foreign students at your school who are experiencing their first Thanksgiving or

taking their first final exams. Maybe you can handle a personality sketch of a nearby high

school athlete who recently set a school scoring record.

Do these seem to be more reachable goals for you? Possibly. But perhaps not yet. Start by writing about what you know. Feature writing includes all of these possibilities, even those

for the top national and international publications, and they are attainable with a lot of hard

work and development of your talents.

You may wish to become a feature writer. You like the idea of writing for mass media such as newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and online publications. You may have an interest

in writing features or perhaps someone once told you that you could write, saying that you

might have what it takes to become a journalist or a novelist. If you want to be a successful

professional feature writer, then you have to be willing to sweat.

You have to like people and be willing to spend time with them, too. You have to be willing to live with frustration. You have to make personal and professional sacrifices.

You

have to be willing to work long hours. You have to be willing to take little or no remuneration

in the beginning. You have to have a strong desire to publish your writing. If you are still with

me after those admonitions, welcome to the world of feature writing. You might just have

what it takes to be a staff or a freelance feature writer. It is important to emphasize the difficulty

of being a successful professional writer. Yet for those who do have the drive and talent to

succeed, there can be significant personal and professional rewards. Your first byline will

be highly satisfying. So will the second, or third, or 400th. The euphoria you feel from this accomplishment at any level, from student newspaper to major international magazine, is equaled by little else in professional writing. And beginners do have a chance at making it. With the right idea at the right time, you can become a published feature writer early in your career.

Chapter 2

Careers as Feature Writers and Editors

Written by:

[Ahmed](#)

Careers as Feature Writers and Editors



Melissa Cantor is senior editor of MIAMI Modern Luxury magazine. Her small and relatively new magazine offers readers lifestyle, design, and fashion features and is growing in circulation.

Her career as a magazine writer and editor evolved in a conventional manner. An award-winning fiction writer, she came to the United States from Honduras in Central America She earned her bachelor's degree at the University of Miami in 2003 and, at the same time, interned at the edgy fashion magazine Zink and eventually became its editor. Cantor did not wish to leave

South Florida when the magazine relocated to New York City, so she went back to school to earn a master of fine arts degree in creative writing. Not long after finishing the degree, she became part of a team of three persons that launched and edited a real estate trade magazine published every two weeks, Miami Agent. Cantor eventually left Miami Agent and became senior editor of the monthly Palm Beach Illustrated magazine. During her time at the highend readership magazine, she wrote regular art and design columns, contributed to several front- and back-of-the-book sections, and wrote features about Palm Beach's elite lifestyles, high society, and celebrity-level residents.

“All of my writing, regardless of the genre, is a combination of the sensibilities I've developed while working simultaneously as a journalist and a fiction writer,” she tells readers of her own Web site, MelissaCantor.com (Cantor, 2008).

I hope that my articles benefit from a strong sense of character or place, or a creative use of language, depending on what is called for. I also do my best to make sure that my literary endeavors are grounded in fact and real-world relevance.

Cantor occasionally teaches writing at the University of Miami, her alma mater for both of her bachelor's and master's degrees, and other South Florida colleges and universities. She has published fiction in essays and writes novels in the little bits of free time she can carve out of her busy schedule.

As far as my work at Miami magazine (and really, my experience in general), what I suspect would be a salient point of interest to an aspiring journalist is what tiny staffs most

magazines have. I have never worked on an editorial staff that consists of more than three people. (Cantor, personal communication to author, October 1, 2008)

When we launched Miami, the local editorial staffers were the editor-in-chief and myself.

However, we share “national” content across all 14 Modern Luxury city books. The national

content is usually a celebrity feature, the fashion photo features, and the occasional travel piece.

Our art department is based in Chicago (the Modern Luxury magazines also share an art department, so our art director, for instance, works on five different books), so the way we

interact with our designers is that we pass keylines back and forth on a server. It poses a particular challenge as an editor, because we must make notes on a document and try to communicate our vision, rather than sit beside an art director to help conceptualize a layout. We

also assign all of our own photography, and the art directors are not involved in this process, so it

is challenging for them as well, as they have no prior relationship to the stories when they receive

the text and images. Our EIC moved back to New York in March of this year in order to launch

Manhattan for Modern Luxury, so since then the Miami-based staff has consisted of an associate

editor and myself.

What I do day-to-day is find story ideas, put together the editorial lineup for each issue alongside the EIC, and then assign the stories and the photography to writers. I have to provide

the writers a story brief, word count and contact information for each story, so much of the initial

leg work is usually mine. Sometimes, if an idea comes from a freelancer, they do the work from

the very beginning, but there are really only one or two freelancers who really understand the

magazine to this extent. Because there are so many print media outlets based in Miami, we also

make a great effort to get our story ideas from sources other than publicists, because stories that

come from publicists tend to end up in all of our competitors’ books as well. We really have to

get out there, meet people and get story leads by word-of-mouth so that we can offer

our readers
something different.

Cantor explained that her work as an editor of a small magazine is more than occasional writing and production work.

Once we receive the stories, they usually require a heavy edit and fact checking. Selects also have

to be done on the photography. Once the story is in layout form, I input captions, deal with any

runover (or short) copy, and finalize. I also track invoices from freelancers, code accordingly, and

submit to our accounting department, and keep track of our expenses so that we stay within our

editorial budget for each issue.

As an editor, finding time for her own writing is often a challenge. But she does continue to

write. She explained:

Because the workload is so heavy, I don't take on too many features. I tend to write shorter pieces

(and freelance). I don't have a specialization in terms of my feature writing. But I do steer clear

of food reviews! In terms of writing, it has been easier for me to identify my weaknesses versus

any strengths and I enjoy the variety of writing about different topics. I find that my writing can

feel repetitive (to me), and I can get very bored of my voice, which seems to permeate all the journalism work that I do, so mixing up the topics helps mitigate that. I can't

imagine committing

to a single area of writing any time soon. Criticism in general is not my strong suit, with the

exception of fashion (reviewing collections). In general, I write a lot of profiles, interior design

stories, and stories about fashion and design. I approach everything with research.

When I begin

to research, whether it's a designer or a home owner or a neighborhood, I instantly start writing

the story in my head, even if what I eventually write about ends up being very different.



The two things that have probably most contributed to my success are my ability to produce clean and accurate copy (I'm a stickler for grammar and, as an editor, I know that this is both rare and much appreciated, and I always verify my facts), and how much I read. I love magazines, and reading them constantly not only gives me ideas, but great writing inspires me, as do the creative ways in which people present information and draw in readers. As far as tricks, again, my biggest tip is reading. I tend to be someone who senses her lead instantly while doing an interview or research, and if I don't, I get very stuck. Reading others helps get my creativity going, and particularly if I can see how others have approached the same topic, it helps me decide which angle to take. I also find that a couple of days of distance from a story makes a world of difference. When I am writing a story, I am so close to it that I can no longer read it objectively, while if I return to it a few days later, I can immediately sense what it needs. As far as advice for young writers, I know that I often have been—and still am sometimes—afraid to ask questions. It can be intimidating to interview someone who is well-known, and I think young writers in particular are hesitant to push any buttons, but I've found that the times when I failed to ask a question, I regretted it much more than the times when I did and perhaps angered someone by doing so.

One of Cantor's more recently written magazine pieces appeared in Palm Beach Illustrated magazine. The article, entitled "Class Distinctions" took a close look at Palm Beach County, a wealthy South Florida region north of Miami and Fort Lauderdale, and its leading private schools. Cantor prepared two sidebar articles to go with the main story, one containing a list of basic information about five leading prep schools and the other discussing important factors involving the schools that go beyond classroom teaching and facilities, such as consistency and faith-based educational components.

"Class Distinctions" was perhaps one of the most difficult I've written. There was so much information to wade through, so many interviews to conduct and schools to tour and it was so difficult to try and present a balanced perspective when there were so many issues on which people have opposing but valid viewpoints. I think it was successful because the schools I was writing about all happened to be so remarkable and provided so many interesting talking points; and the people I interviewed were eloquent and dedicated. Both facts made my job infinitely easier. In the end, I hope that in the story and the accompanying sidebars, I raised questions for people who live in a world where elite private schools are the norm. And for those who do not, I hope I provided a window into this fascinating world. The most important reporting strategy in this instance was to talk to as many people as possible, on and off the record, so that I had a real sense of this environment, rather than simply what people tell you when they know it will be published.

Chapter 3

Finding Good Feature Article Ideas

Written by:

[Nahla](#)

Finding Good Feature Article Ideas



Ernesto Londoño works in a compound. He cannot get out of it very often to pursue news and feature stories as easily as he would like. Security is far too strict and conditions where he writes and reports can be quite dangerous at times. Londoño is a correspondent based in Baghdad for The Washington Post. Because of the circumstances of his bureau's location and the war surrounding him, his reporting and story writing opportunities are often limited by safety and access issues. But he still writes regularly about the U.S. troops and other events in Iraq. In his second assignment in Iraq, the young journalist, who joined The Post after working

as a city desk reporter for the Dallas Morning News, still searches for a good feature story to balance the breaking news he is expected to provide to readers of his newspaper and its Web site.

“Although what we do here fits the traditional hard news mold nine times out of 10, some of the most compelling and well-read stories we do are strong narratives,” the 27-year-old Londoño (personal communication to author, September 6, 2008) said. “Those are typically the stories that really resonate with readers the most. They’re not always easy to pull off in a war zone, given the crush of news, but we’ve done plenty.”

Londoño earned his bachelor’s degree in print journalism and Latin American studies at the University of Miami in 2003. After finishing school, he interned at The Washington Post and was given his first job at the Dallas Morning News. He joined The Post as a staff writer about two years later. He is now on his second assignment as a correspondent in Iraq, covering the conflict in the Middle East for his newspaper. Now working for The Post Foreign Service as a correspondent, his local experience helps him. He writes many breaking news stories from Baghdad and elsewhere in Iraq, but he tries to find time for feature writing as well.

“I covered criminal justice in suburban Maryland for nearly three years before getting a job on the foreign desk, based in Baghdad. I’ve been here since April 2008. My first Baghdad stint was a two-month rotation in early 2007,” he explained.

I’m one of three Post staff writers in the Baghdad bureau. We have a large Iraqi staff that includes six reporters/interpreters and a handful of stringers in key provinces. We cover daily and breaking news and report and write feature stories. The latter is always challenging in Iraq, a fast-paced, dangerous and unpredictable place. It has become harder because we are increasingly asked to file stories for the web site and for the Financial Times, which have earlier deadlines.

Our information comes from a variety of sources. We communicate daily with U.S. diplomats, the American military and Iraqi officials. We stay on top of the basics by reviewing press releases, checking the wires, making beat calls and monitoring the Iraqi press. But

the best stories and scoops generally come from sources we've worked hard to cultivate. Most of our ideas for feature and other big-picture, enterprise stories originate in the bureau, but a few are conceived by editors in Washington. Our local staff is the best starting point. Our drivers, bodyguards and translators know Iraq far better than we ever will. And they often come to us with fascinating yarns.

Londoño likes to write human interest features because he knows they are widely read. These stories are centered on the human side of war and focus on individuals or small groups of individuals.

I find that stories about people—be it Iraqis or U.S. soldiers—are the ones that resonate most with readers. It's hard to make a story about a car bomb compelling after six years of war. So we seek to take readers behind the scenes through the eyes of the people we meet. We like to tell them what war sounds like, feels like, looks like; how it changes lives, families and neighborhoods. There are no short cuts. Good journalism requires getting to the right place at the right time and spending as much time as you can there. It requires knowing when to ask questions and when to stand by, listen and observe.

Londoño recently wrote a feature about soldiering in Iraq by focusing on a single man and his experiences. This is how it began:

MOSUL, Iraq—An hour before sunrise, under a star-studded sky, 1st Lt. Michael Baxter's soldiers packed their gear into Bradley Fighting Vehicles, heading out to patrol neighborhoods

where fighting insurgents often seems like warring with shadows.

Soldiers took long drags on cigarettes before strapping 40 pounds of armor and gear onto

their backs, saying little save for quick back-and-forth on radios. They crammed into the cabins

of the tracked, armored vehicles that rattle like flimsy wooden roller-coaster cars and tuned out the sights and sounds of the city. Mosul, a city in northern Iraq that straddles the Tigris River, has long been a stronghold of Sunni insurgents. When U.S. and Iraqi security forces aggressively fought Sunni extremists in Baghdad and other provinces, insurgents flocked to Mosul in recent months. The patrols took place on the eve of an offensive against the insurgents that Iraqi officials had vowed to undertake here. The offensive has been dubbed Lion's Roar, and it may cast a spotlight on the readiness and competence of the Iraqi military and police in northern Iraq.

"This is their operation," said Maj. Amanda Emmens-Rossi, a U.S. military spokeswoman in Mosul. "It was conceived and led by the Iraqi military."

U.S. military officials say an offensive here is unlikely to unfold like the 2004 battle of Fallujah, in which U.S. troops fought entrenched insurgent cells with considerable success. And the battle in Mosul is considerably different from recent fights in Baghdad and Basra.

"This is not a Fallujah," said Lt. Col. Christopher Johnson, commander of the 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment, which is deployed in eastern Mosul. Gathering intelligence on insurgent networks has been daunting, and insurgents have seldom fought security forces face to face. "They pick the time and place". (Londoño, 2008, p. A07)

Londoño explained: "This story provided a compelling glimpse of what it's like to be a soldier in Iraq now that there's little face-to-face combat. Many soldiers have been here [Iraq] for three or four rotations. They have a hard, scary and frustrating job" (personal

communication

to author, September 28, 2008). “The best material for this story did not come from interviews.

I got it by listening and observing—being a fly on the wall. That’s the key to reporting solid features.”

There will be days when a good story idea comes to you easily, even in a dangerous war zone such as they do for Londoño, but there will be other days when an idea will be difficult

to generate. Often, writers must develop workable ideas from circumstances, conditions, and

surroundings that are important to their publication’s readers. During 2007 and 2008, travel

was one of the industries seriously affected by sharp increases in oil and associated fuel costs.

All aspects of the travel industry were impacted, from airlines to ships to buses, trains, and

even personal automobiles. While gasoline, Jet-A fuel for airplanes, and other fuel prices went

up, so did ticket prices and fill-ups at local gas station pumps. The travel industry and travelers

were severely impacted. Fares jumped to new levels and some routes, both international and

regional, were cut. More changes came to a huge industry in the face of a changing world

economy. Priorities for travel were upended. Travel publications such as Travel & Leisure and

Condé Nast Traveler published numerous articles about the new conditions and changes for

readers. Newspapers with travel and business sections did much the same. In one example,

Washington Post writer Sholnn Freeman (2008) prepared a news feature for the newspaper’s

Financial section that told of travelers who were so frustrated that they were taking trains along

the U.S. East Coast instead of flying. Using one traveler as an example, Freeman wrote:

Jada Golden stood in the waiting lounge at Union Station, explaining why Amtrak is a better way to travel than an airline.

“It’s as heavy as we want,” Golden said, pointing to an oversize suitcase. “We can put it

on
a rack in the rail car and get things out of it.”
Golden, 36 and a Boston schoolteacher, pointed to another bag—a large paper grocery
bag
filled with sandwiches, salads, water and fruit. “You can bring food,” she said.
She continued. On the train, she’s free to pick her own seat and doesn’t have a flight
attendant telling her when to use electronics. And then there’s the airline stress factor—
the
security headaches and the delays.
“You’re always delayed in the airport,” Golden said. “You always have connecting
flights.”
With delays, airport congestion and sky-high jet fuel prices draining the romance and
convenience of air travel, Americans have increasingly turned to Amtrak for summer
travel.
(Freeman, 2008, p. D01)

The story then describes how people, such as this woman, are changing their travel habits. The story is built around more traveler anecdotes and, of course, some national Amtrak passenger statistics. Many story ideas such as this one can turn around rather rapidly and still illustrate trends or broader social or economic matters. However, the process of finding and developing feature story ideas can require patience and organization. It can also require a little serendipity or even luck.

o **Getting Started**

Do you notice the ordinary and extraordinary things around you? When you drive to work or to school, do you make the extra effort to notice people or places or what is happening during that routine trip? Do you take time to look around when you go someplace new? What do you see? Is it interesting to you? Would it be interesting to others? Do you ever think of these observations as ideas for your writing?

Have you met anyone new today? What does that person do for a living? Has your regular network of friends and acquaintances brought anything different or unique into your life recently? What did you do out of the ordinary this week? Was it fun? Was it informative? Was it significant? Did you learn anything from the experience? Would anyone else be interested?

Any of these questions, if answered in the affirmative, might lead to a very good feature story. Finding feature ideas can be that easy. Some subjects practically announce their potential as a story to an alert writer. Others need the experienced eye and ear of a feature writer to work them into readable and salable articles.

Paying attention to what is going on around her is one of the major ways in which Liz Balmaseda, former columnist and feature writer for The Miami Herald who won the 1993

Pulitzer Prize for commentary, said the entire city is what gives her ideas. “I look around and see what’s going on,” Balmaseda (personal communication to author, June 6, 1993) explained.

“I talk to a lot of people and ask them to tell me what’s going on where they work and where they live.”

Balmaseda said she also depends on people to call her with column and feature article ideas. As a highly visible columnist for one of the nation’s major daily newspapers, she gets large numbers of telephone calls and letters. “People will call me and give me ideas,” she said.

“And I also talk to people in the newsroom. Reporters around the newsroom are crucial teammates for me. With their help, I look for wrongs—people who have been wronged” (personal communication to author, June 6, 1993).

Feature writers have to notice details of things around them. You probably will not have such unusual experiences as Mt. Everest or Antarctic expeditions on which to base your articles.

But stories can come from the ordinary, or seemingly ordinary. If you drive the same road to work or school every day, try to vary the route. Look at the scenery with an eye for story possibilities. For example, if you drive past the same house every day, look in the driveway.

The old cars that the owner of the house is working on might be more than what they appear.

Is there a chance this person restores valuable older cars? Isn’t this a story prospect?

Why not
stop and ask a few questions?

Professor Margaret Davidson believes being a keen observer is what makes the biggest difference between a good writer and an average one, especially in terms of finding news and story ideas. “A good writer is a good observer—of people, surroundings, ideas and trends, and the general flotsam and jetsam of the world around,” Davidson (1990, p. 7) explained. “Some people seem to go through life with blinders on. They are so wrapped up in their own comings and goings they are unaware of the ebb and flow around them. But others observe the world in sharp detail with the vision to see everything in perspective, appreciating its true value” (p. 7). Davidson also says this is especially true of college students. “For some of the students—the world seems to be a colorful and fascinating place with an endless supply of worthwhile news stories. But for many others it appears to be very a sterile, boring existence where little that is exciting ever happens” (p. 7). If you go somewhere new, think even before you leave home about what possibilities for stories and articles exist. If you like the destination, why? Would others like it also? If that new boutique has unusual or new designs, tell others about it—in a feature story. Meeting someone new and different can be exciting, also. However, don’t think about the new acquaintance from a personal perspective. Think about him or her from a writer’s professional point of view. Is this person worthy of a feature story? What makes him or her interesting to readers? What has this person done that others would like to know? Perhaps the person is in town for just a few days and really lives in a foreign country—perhaps a relatively unknown small country like Belize in Central America. Wouldn’t this be a chance to write about the person, the country, and all the unusual aspects of life in a country that many Americans do not know much about?

Finding story and article ideas are related to natural curiosity. Often, the best ideas occur when writers think like 3- or 4-year-olds, always asking “why?” and “how?” And you have to think about what you do each day—you did something unusual, even something as simple as deciding where to go for spring break or over a long weekend. You could write a story listing your own favorite places. Or compile a list from the information provided by tourism and visitors bureaus. Those might just make a good story.

o **Identifying Potential Feature Article Material**

What makes a great feature article idea—an idea that gets published? Just about everything around you is possible feature material. Use your senses. Look around. Absorb. Notice. Listen. Look. Your job is to take these undeveloped ideas and turn them into something interesting for readers. People can be the source and subject of some of the best story ideas. Often a powerful story about a successful person’s problems helps readers to see the “real” side of that individual. We learn from how he or she has experienced adversity and overcome it, or made the comeback to succeed a second time, lost a loved one, or survived a brush with death. These stories often make wonderful feature articles.

Williamson (1975) says finding a feature story idea should be easy. Those stories seem to jump out and practically scream, “Write me!” Williamson argued, “A great advantage in being a reporter is that you have a ‘license’ to find out about all those things you’ve always been curious about” (p. 70).

New York Times “This Land” writer Dan Barry found an innovative and appealing approach to the national story about easy mortgages, unpaid loans, and foreclosed homes when he visited Fort Myers, Florida. But instead of simply talking to bankers, regulators, homeowners, victims of foreclosure, and residents in neighborhoods affected by the problem, he

found a fresh approach. Barry found the one man in Fort Myers, a medium-sized city in southwest Florida, who worked for the City of Fort Myers and is responsible for mowing the lawns and boarding up the abandoned homes. It was a unique perspective that told a different story than the countless features published during a period of financial crisis in the United States. Barry (2008, p. A16) opened his story with this lead:

FORT MYERS, Fla.—The lawn mower’s whine disrupts the morning peace of Coconut Drive like an alarm clock no one remembers setting. It rises and falls and rises again, as the angry machine cuts across the front-lawn jungle of an attractive house with great location and move-in potential. Abandoned, in other words. Three years ago, sold for \$660,000; today, a ghostly parcel of failure.

Barry continued to tell the story of Shayne Becher, 39, who worked for the city code enforcement office. He spends his days cutting grass and hammering sheets of plywood onto exterior walls. Barry’s “nut graf”—the paragraph that tells readers why the story needs to be read—explains the big picture:

“Beautiful,” he says. Then he drives a few blocks to another site of abandonment, on Sunset Place.

Come to Fort Myers, population 60,000, the seat of Lee County. Walk the Gulf Coast beaches. Cruise the Caloosahatchee River. Witness what happens when banks dole out easy mortgages and homeowners forget that the money isn’t free. Drive down McGregor Boulevard, or Cleveland Avenue, turn left or turn right, and see the empty houses, the overgrown lots, the signs saying AUCTION and FREE RENT (Barry, 2008, p. A16).

The story, published as part of the newspaper’s National Report, paints a grim picture that illustrates the desperation and suffering of homeowners, but also the problems they leave behind

for the neighbors and the cities that must care for abandoned properties.

The key to a successful story such as this one by Dan Barry is curiosity. Be curious about who takes care of the homes when they are left empty. Maybe you have not dealt with mortgage issues, of course, but maybe you know someone who has experienced the problem first hand.

Let these casual observations turn into story prospects, especially if you see a unique angle such as the man solely responsible for city maintenance of abandoned homes. Once you notice things, hear about something appealing, once you meet someone, once you discover something interesting to you, let your journalistic curiosity take over. Satisfy your inquisitiveness by finding out about the subject. How? If you always wanted to learn about sailing, go to a marina to interview a local sailor or take lessons at a nearby lake, or go to a nearby sailing club meeting.

Finding the right story idea is also dependent on the publication for which you will write the story. You need to know what sort of material the publication publishes. This is more easily done if you work for the publication, but it can be relatively easy to find out if you take time to research the publication and its market (Bowman, 1997). You also need to know the basic characteristics of feature ideas. What are they? Traditionally, good feature ideas have eight basic elements, according to Schoenfeld and Diegmüller (1982). Those elements are as follows:

1. Appeal to people—The story has to meet a need of the reader.
2. Facts—A feature that works will contain certain information, or facts, about that subject that will be beneficial to readers in some way.
3. Personalities—Facts are enhanced with personality. A story that can offer some unusual person or personality with facts and appeal will be much stronger.
4. Angle—The right “slant” or theme makes the subject tie together better.
5. Action—Can you make the story come alive? It will if you have some activity in the story. It is relatively simple—people should do something in your story.
6. Uniqueness and universality—The topic should be different and should have broad appeal at the same time.
7. Significance—Timeliness, proximity, prominence, and relevance create

significance

in a story.

8. Energy increment—The story should stir your readers just as the idea stirred you to write the story. You should show your enthusiasm and sincerity.

Finally, think about the necessity that all feature ideas remain fresh. Just like bread, a feature

idea has a certain shelf life and it is up to you as a writer to make certain the idea is developed

and published in story form while it is still fresh. The best idea won't work with editors or

with readers if it is stale.

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