

*Fifth Edition*

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**FEATURE  
WRITING**

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**for Newspapers  
and Magazines**

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*The Pursuit of Excellence*

**Edward Jay Friedlander • John Lee**

**FIFTH EDITION**

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# **FEATURE WRITING FOR NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES**

**The Pursuit of Excellence**

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## READERS SERVED AND TEXT OBJECTIVES

Welcome to the fifth edition of *Feature Writing for Newspapers and Magazines*, a book that has served in college and university classrooms for almost two decades. This staying power, buttressed by trend-setting writing examples, periodic updates, and timely tips from some of America's best feature writers, has made it the premier text in its field and the ideal guide for two types of writers.

One kind of writer will find work as a reporter with a weekly or daily newspaper. Such a person will be hired primarily to cover the news: fires, club meetings, murders, bake sales. At some point, it's likely that some icy editor who doesn't even know the reporter's first name will assign something called a "feature story." The feature story may at first appear to be on a hopeless topic—perhaps the story of a wealthy civic leader who opens a boutique specializing in silk flowers—or it may be extraordinary, such as the story of Edward Zepp by Madeleine Blais found in Chapter 2 of this book.

The other kind of writer to whom the book speaks is the aspiring magazine staffer or budding freelance magazine writer. The magazine staffer will walk much the same editorial road as the newspaper writer, though the twists and turns may not look and feel the same. For the freelance writer, the path may be more tortuous. Freelance is another word for self-employed. (And, in many cases, "self-employed" is a synonym for unemployed.) Self-employed writers are in many ways like newspaper feature writers and magazine staffers but are additionally burdened with the awesome tasks of finding and selling their stories.

For either set of writers, this book's purpose is to explain. With luck, the book will explain well, and will show them—through suggestions and work from some of the best newspaper feature and magazine article writers in the United States—how they, too, can achieve excellence in writing.

## WHAT'S NEW?

One of the true pleasures of guiding a textbook through five editions is the ability to tweak and refine the editorial content to its maximum strength. The changes in this fifth edition are significant. The book itself has been redesigned for easier reading. Several new examples of writing excellence have been added to aid the student writer. All 10 chapters have been revised and updated to match the steady growth of journalistic techniques and technology. Among the new materials you will find:

- Biographies of four new Pulitzer winners for feature writing—Angelo B. Henderson of *The Wall Street Journal*'s Detroit bureau (1999), J. R. Moehringer of

the *Los Angeles Times* (2000), Tom Hallman Jr. of *The Oregonian* in Portland (2001), and Barry Siegel of the *Los Angeles Times* (2002)—now appear in Chapter 1.

- A thoroughly revised examination of Internet-assisted research and data retrieval has been provided in Chapter 4 to keep pace with one of the fastest growing aspects of American journalism.
- Chapter 4 also contains an expanded examination of a burgeoning new market for freelance writers—electronic magazines.
- You will also read case-history comments and writing aids from several new Pulitzer winners—Henderson, Moehringer, and Siegel. These invaluable writing tips are scattered through Chapters 5 and 6.
- In Chapters 5 and 6, you also will encounter excerpts from five new Pulitzer Prize-winning feature articles. As with all writing examples in this book, the excerpts are accompanied by a careful analysis of the authors' writing techniques.
- In Chapter 7, you will read about the multimedia potential for the three Pulitzer Prize-winning stories featured there.
- Chapter 9 contains two new magazine stories, along with tips for writing magazine reviews.
- And finally, in Chapter 10, you will see a fully revised treatment of the libel and privacy laws so important to every potential newspaper and magazine feature writer in search of true excellence.

## DEFINING EXCELLENCE

Of course, excellence is difficult to define, which is why the authors have relied on newspaper journalism's best known award, the Pulitzer Prize, as one convenient gauge, and major magazine honors, such as the National Magazine Awards, as another. As a result, you will now find 25 years of Pulitzer feature material included in the book, and you'll read tips and comments from many of the award-winning journalists and magazine writers.

The range of stories is far reaching. You'll read riveting medical features ("Mrs. Kelly's Monster," by Jon Franklin); sordid crimes ("Death of a Playmate," by Teresa Carpenter); truly inspirational profiles ("Like Something the Lord Made," by Katie McCabe); celebrity interviews ("Cybill Shepherd," by Ed Weathers); sad stories ("Ashes to Dust," by Linda Wilson); massively researched backgrounders ("The Bureaucracy: How Did It Get So Big?" by Saul Pett); even a couple of macho pieces from men's adventure magazines.

But no matter what the topic, the country's best newspaper feature and magazine article writers all offer about the same basic advice, guidance proffered long ago by iconoclast and journalist H. L. Mencken of *The Baltimore Sun*. Said Mencken: "There are no dull subjects. There are only dull writers."

So read on. Then write hard. And write well.

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*Edward Jay Friedlander*

*John Lee*

**FEATURE WRITING  
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# THE NEWSPAPER FEATURE STORY

## THE FEATURE: HELEN'S STORY

"Foxborough," says the editor. "I've got an assignment for you."

The city editor of the *Chronicle* hands Helen Foxborough a sticky yellow note bearing only a name and telephone number.

"It's a feature story," the editor says. "The chief mechanic at the biggest cab company in the city says he can get 300,000 miles out of an ordinary automobile engine before it has to be rebuilt, and he's willing to tell us about it. Most of our readers would love to discover some way to get that kind of use out of their cars.

"This could be a very well read story."

Foxborough, less than ecstatic, takes the note. She is hoping for a major, hard-news story. Instead she gets a feature. Foxborough, two months out of college and just transferred to the *Chronicle's* city desk after a probationary period rewriting news releases from public relations sources, barely remembers how to write a feature. Walking to her desk, she strains to recall the features she wrote in college.

The concept, she remembers, is to write something like a nonfiction short story: quotation-filled, descriptive, entertaining, informative.

As Foxborough taps out the mechanic's telephone number, she hopes writing this feature will be like swimming after years of little or no practice; she hopes the technique will return to her naturally, and quickly, before she sinks to the bottom of the pool or, in this case, finds herself banished back to rewriting news releases.

The mechanic agrees to an interview. But first Foxborough needs to do some research. She checks the newspaper's electronic library for previous stories about the cab mechanic, then calls the service managers of the city's three largest automobile dealerships to determine whether coaxing 300,000 miles from an auto engine is as unusual as it sounds. The service managers confirm the oddity. Foxborough knows the story will be even stronger if she contacts a nationally recognized source, so—on a tip from one of the service managers—she calls the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence (NIASE), which tests and certifies many automobile mechanics. Eventually, she reaches an expert, who—like the service managers—confirms the novelty of the mechanic's claim. Using several key words garnered from the interview with the NIASE expert, she conducts multiple Internet searches to locate examples of high-mileage

automobile engines and the service techniques used to achieve long engine life. She also makes a note to talk to some of the cab company's employees after she finishes interviewing the mechanic.

Then Foxborough hurries out to her first professional feature interview.

Just over an hour later, she returns to the newspaper with her assorted pages of interview notes. Three hours after that, the mechanic's story is told to the *Chronicle's* readers on page one of the newspaper's local news section. And with that, Foxborough has successfully passed one more test of her journalistic ability.

Foxborough's experience with the *Chronicle* is not at all unusual. Most of America's daily newspapers have a circulation of less than 25,000. Assuming that you're lucky enough to find a job with a daily newspaper, you'll likely begin your career at a small one such as the *Chronicle*. Beginning reporters working for small-circulation dailies are expected to be able to write both news and feature stories. Often a reporter's first months on the job may consist of even more feature writing than weighty news writing, until a "beat" is assigned or the reporter otherwise gains the confidence of the editor.

Feature writing, then, is a crucial weapon in the arsenal of writing talents required of the professional print journalist, particularly in the twenty-first century, when television news and various new media forms are focusing more and more on such popular stories.

## An Overview

As Foxborough correctly remembered, a feature story is a journalistic article that is typically both original and descriptive. Some feature stories are geared toward entertainment with little information. Other features inform, but entertain little. The best combine both aspects.

Let's take another look at that definition, step by step.

A feature story is *original* in two ways. First, it is original in respect to the way it is written. Simple news stories are commonly written in what is called the inverted pyramid style. This rigid form, which began to evolve at about the time of the American Civil War, demands that a story begin with a one-paragraph lead of one or perhaps two sentences summing up the essence of the story. The lead is short, typically less than 35 words. The rest of the story is written in a declining order of importance, with information proceeding from the most important to the least important.

The inverted pyramid made sense during the Civil War because stories often were filed using telegraph lines, which could be disrupted at any time. In that situation, it obviously was a good idea first to send a summary—or what journalists today call the lead of the story—and then to transmit the rest of the story with information in a declining order of importance. The inverted pyramid style of newswriting makes even more sense today, for two reasons. First, readers can quickly scan the story by reading the lead and perhaps a few additional paragraphs. Second, busy editors can cut news stories simply by removing less important material from the bottom of the story.

Unlike the news story's inverted pyramid style, the feature story's form is more fluid. Feature stories probably date to the beginning of world journalism, but they began to assume their modern form in the United States in the "penny press" of the 1830s. They



most strongly resemble short stories in structure. For example, they have distinct beginnings, middles, and ends. Feature stories, unlike news stories, aren't intended for the scanning reader. They must be read completely in order to make sense. They also must be edited carefully by removing various sections from throughout the text, rather than just from the end.

Features are also *original* because they can be about virtually any subject that falls within the realm of "human interest," unlike news stories, which presumably are written only because they cover newsworthy events.

Human interest obviously means what "interests people," and a good rule of thumb is that anything that interests the feature writer and the editor is also likely to interest a substantial number of readers. Human interest stories can be about both "people" and "things," but journalists know that "people" stories typically are more interesting and are more often read than are stories about "things." For that matter, stories about unusual events are more interesting than stories about usual events, but you'll read more about that later.

In summary, if you've found a story about a person, and something about that individual is unusual, you probably have a good feature story idea.

In that sense, Foxborough's cab mechanic article is an example of an acceptable feature story. What the cab mechanic accomplished by getting 300,000 miles of service from an automobile engine isn't breaking news by anyone's definition. Most readers, for instance, probably have a friend of a friend who has nursed a family sedan almost that far. But the story has a human quality because it is about the mechanic and his ideas rather than about an automobile engine. The story also carries an element of oddity because obtaining that much mileage from an engine is, in fact, unusual.

Actually, feature stories need not even have the element of oddity for them to contain human interest. Some feature writers maintain they can write a good feature story about absolutely anyone and have, in fact, proved it by opening the city telephone directory at random, pointing to a name, and then doing a feature story on the person they've selected.

How? Let's look at an example. Pretend you have opened your city telephone directory and randomly selected page 72. You stab your finger at a name halfway down the first column.

The name you have picked is Roger Grub. Grub lives in a middle-class suburb of the city. On the surface, you have nothing that would suggest a feature story. Your next step is the city directory (found in almost every newspaper office), which lists name, address, and occupation. From the directory you learn that Grub is the manager of the produce section of a large supermarket.

This fact suggests that you might be able to interview him for expert tips about how shoppers can select the choicest samples of produce. You call him, ascertain he is still the produce manager, explain your story idea, and set up an interview.

During the interview, you discover that Grub is a third-generation produce manager and that, indeed, he does have strong ideas on how shoppers can best select fruits and vegetables.

As the interview progresses, you discover there are other, even better feature possibilities with Grub. For instance, you learn that he is an amateur historian who has a large