

Six tips to improve your feature writing

As public relations professionals today, we spend a fair bit of our time writing for the web. One of the dangers of this is that we forget the skills of good feature writing. Use it—or lose it!

There will always be a need for good feature articles for the simple reason there are subjects that cannot be explained adequately on the average web page. And, oh yes, even in our over-communicated world, people like reading features. O.K., they may print out a 4,000 word article rather than reading it on-screen.

Here are some practical tips to improve your feature writing:

1. **Spend a lot of time thinking about and crafting the lead to your article.** The lead is what gets readers interested in reading your article. Fail to get readers' attention and they'll click on another link, or turn the page.

Great inspirations for leads are references to pop culture: films, books, Hollywood personalities, business icons, songs, etc. if they relate to the topic you're writing about.

When interviewing your sources, press them for stories and anecdotes that might help you craft the lead. If you can do the interview in person, which is rare these days, look around your subject's office: are there quirky and wonderful things that you could ask about? And how would they relate to the lead of your article?

Avoid starting your subject, whatever it might be, with the history of that category. "If someone asks you for the time, don't start with the history of time-keeping...."

2. **Push interview subjects to give you profound, meaty quotes.** Sometimes, a meaty quote is a great way to begin an article. On these occasions, you are spared working on the lead to your piece too hard.

Clean up quotes from your source. Don't put in "umms" and "ahhs." Cleaning up quotes is not a crime. When you are a public relations professional representing your organization, you want your sources to appear brilliant. Taking things out of context or misquoting your interview subjects, however, can get you into trouble. Double-check your quotes to make sure you are clear on their meaning.

Avoid diluting meaty quotes by paraphrasing them first, and then directly quoting your source. This takes all the wind out of your sails. The beauty of quotes is their *impact*.

3. **Work on your diction.** A feature is a great opportunity to use interesting and uncommon words. Don't use unusual words for their own sake, but if the occasion warrants it, pepper your article with a few words that might just send a few readers searching in their dictionaries. There is nothing wrong with that. (On the flip side, too much fancy diction makes your writing laboured—and makes you sound pompous.)
4. **Work on your transitions.** Especially if your article is long, transitions help guide readers through your material in a logical fashion. Also see our Free PR Lesson on "Transitional Words and Expressions."
5. **Details, details, details.** Fight against the organizational tendency of over-generalizing and the broad-brush approach. Fight for details! You don't have to have details, proof, back-up for everything, but details make feature writing come alive. And readers love details. What colour was the convertible that brought the celebrity? What music did the band play? How many pounds of potato salad were consumed at the company picnic?
6. **Become an alumni of good writing.** When you see a well-written article, clip it out or save it in your "Writing File." The Writing File is a great place to go when you have writer's block; it helps you get unstuck.

Some of our favourite publications are: *Vanity Fair*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Fortune*, *Newsweek*, *Time* and *Fast Company*.

Remember that exceptional times lead to exceptional journalism. As horrific as they were, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, gave rise to many great opinion and commentary pieces. We have found that obituaries, along with Arts critics, are also writing pieces to study. Add these to your Writing File, too.