

Produce a Feature

Second course, Third grading period, Week 3

Features are the texture, the everyday reality ramifications, the people stories, the community snapshots, the glorious sidebars that ride alongside the news. Examples are everywhere ... a portrait of a remote Alaskan community that must deal with sending troops to Iraq while planning for subsistence in the coming winter for the loved ones who remain; the Highland Folk Center's role in shaping the music and politics of a generation, the chronicle of the day after a team suffers a big defeat. Most of these stories spring off the news or add insight to news events.

Laurence Gilliam, a former Head of the BBC Features Department, as quoted in Radio Production states this purpose of the feature: It can take the enquiring mind, the alert ear, the selective eye, and the broadcasting microphone into every corner of the contemporary world or into the deepest recess of experience. Its task and its destiny is to mirror the true inwardness of its subject, to explore the boundaries of radio and television and to perfect techniques for the use of the creative artist in broadcasting.



Enduring Understanding

Features are the texture, the everyday reality ramifications, the people stories, the community snapshots, the glorious sidebars that ride alongside the news. Features inform, entertain and inspire listeners. Features often contain data, statistics and factually correct information presented in an engaging manner to make the central subject more memorable.



Essential Questions

What is a feature? What structure, qualities and techniques might be considered when producing a feature?



Objectives and Outcome

- Students will be able to understand the purpose of the feature and the process of conceiving a feature.
- Students will be able to suggest features that can add background and insight to news, sports, cultural and public affairs.
- Students will understand the difference between writing straight news reports and human-interest features.
- Students will produce a feature for podcasting.



Suggested Time

One week



Resources and Materials

The Pen Is Easier Than the Mic (www.transom.org/tools/beginnings/2006/200602_bill_mckibben/)
A personal account of producing a feature by writer Bill McKibben. Site also includes the Gourmet magazine article that resulted from the same interview that aired on radio.

David Kestenbaum Q and A (www.transom.org/guests/review/200604_david_kestenbaum/)
On Better Writing Through Radio, Nancy Updike
(www.transom.org/guests/review/200601_nancy_updike/)

Local and national radio examples of features
RTNDA Edward R. Murrow Awards (www.rtnda.org)

“Features and Documentaries,” Writing for Television, Radio and New Media, pages 181-197

“Types of Sports Programs,” Writing for Television, Radio and New Media, page 171

“The feature,” Radio Production, pages 274-275



Procedure

In this lesson teachers will focus on the feature — its requirements, attributes, structure and variety. In “Elements of the Sports Feature” (Week 5) and “Facing Public Affairs” (Weeks 6-7), students will be introduced to two particular types of radio features. At the end of this term, students will produce either a sports or a public affairs feature as their end-of-term project.

Define “feature.”

1. In the broadest categorizing, media content is divided into news, opinion and feature. Features often spring from a news story or event but may stand alone to provide an audio picture of the place in which a community lives or to introduce a people listeners may never meet.

There are many types of features. Some follow a rather formulaic structure, others are audio diaries; some weave sound like vox pops, others feel more conversational such as a profile of someone who has a passion. Some are linked to the news, others seem to have no link at all. What all features have in common is a way of taking listeners to a place or introducing them to a person, whatever the broadcasting style, so that they are left with a better understanding of a person, a place, an issue or the news.

Students have already worked with features: “Lost & Found Sound” (First course, First grading period) and “Sound of MOS” (First course, Second grading period). More will follow.

2. Distribute “Feature Vocabulary” and discuss the definitions of “feature” and “featurette.” Select a recent feature from your local radio station or one of the Edward R. Murrow Award winners (www.rtnda.org) from your region. After listening to it, identify qualities of a feature illustrated by it.

Features require human interest.

3. Define “human interest.” Give students a news topic and ask them to give examples of the human-interest (HI) aspect of the story. Here are some examples:

- News: Scientists have found more evidence of global warming at the North Pole. HI: How global warming is affecting life for fishermen (in Alaska, along the Atlantic Coast, in your local streams and lakes);
- News: Report on recent trends in the housing market in your area. HI: How the slump in the housing market is affecting a family that needs to sell or teachers who cannot afford to live in your school district;
- News: New Orleans neighborhoods that have seen little evidence of restoration one year after devastating damage. HI: A New Orleans’ family relocated in your school district is so frustrated about FEMA issues after Hurricane Katrina, that they vow to return so they can be with other angry citizens who want to band together to rebuild with mutual appreciation of their plights;
- News: Modifications in certification requirements. HI: How “No Child Left Behind” requirements have affected a teacher who needs re-certification; and
- News: Report of attacks on three students on their way to school. HI: How violence in your school, or neighboring schools, has affected shy students. Is fear common in school children in your area?

Brainstorm a list of human-interest angles that could be developed into features by your Radio Production class.

There is not one style or structure for features.

4. Students can become familiar with some of the different styles and structures of features — some of which take a considerable time and experience to produce — if teachers spend the next days listening to and analyzing features. We are suggesting some features, but teachers should be collecting examples from current programming and recent features that have won recognition.

Organize the class into groups of five. Give each person 10 note cards. Select a feature of no more than five minutes to play for this exercise. Teachers might select from available features, “Blind Wrestlers” (http://www.aarp.org/fun/radio/pt_postscript/blind_wrestlers.html) or “Catfish Noodling” (<http://podcast.prx.org/showcase/?p=8>), from KGOU Public Radio in Norman, Okla. (This was a 2006 Region 6 RTNDA Murrow Award Feature Reporting winner.)

- For the first minute of the feature, number students in each group 1-5. Student Number 1 will record what takes place in the first 12 seconds, Number 2 in the next 12 seconds, etc. Teachers will call the number of the student at each 12-second interval so as the third 12-second interval begins teachers will say “3.”
- For their 12 seconds, students are to record what is heard. For example, “buzzing sound, unclear of source, gets louder” or “reporter sets up story with news peg and description of the place.” At the end of a minute, stop the audio. Students in each group share their notes and discuss the set-up for the feature. State who or what is introduced, evaluate subject clarity at this point, assess how effectively mood or setting has been established. Discuss how much was covered and how well each 12-second unit flowed into the next.

- On the second index card, each student writes what he or she thinks the feature is about. After listening to the entire feature, students will see how close they were; whether they missed early clues, if the feature clearly established its intent in the first minute or if the feature had an element of surprise or more than one message/conclusion.
- Teachers should now play the next minute of the feature. Students are to jot down on three-four cards, what is happening in each element; for example, a reporter track, ambience and actuality. Their lists may look something like this:
 - Sounds of event taking place (specify)
 - Reporter copy introduces the person in a descriptive manner (a few of the phrases should be recorded)
 - Reporter mentions x, y, z (specify)
 - Actuality: main character in the feature shares his feelings about ...
- Group members should discuss the content and its order. Is this feature unfolding with enough details that listeners understand the context, news peg, location and intent?
- Teachers now play the entire feature so students hear it uninterrupted. On one of their remaining index cards, students should write what they thought was the strength of the feature, the part they liked best. On another card, they should note what they thought was confusing, missing or unnecessary.
- Group members should discuss what they liked and did not like about the feature. Give everyone an opportunity to share his or her ideas.
- The discussion then opens for the entire class to hear and share some of the main ideas presented in the groups. Additional questions that teachers might raise include:
 - What feelings arose when they heard the tape?
 - Was this a good way into the subject matter?
 - What small choices made by the producer – in the placement of sound, a phrase, the introduction of a main character actuality – enhanced or distracted from the whole feature?

Features may follow a pattern or structure.

5. Many times a feature – particularly for the beginning reporter — can be structured in an order that helps the feature’s producer grasp its complexity. Give students “Basic Structure of a Feature” and review the six-part order.

“Carrying Her Weight” (www.kbia.org/news/murrow.htm) may be used to review how this structure works. In this 2006 Edward R. Murrow, Sports Reporting Region winner, a Columbia, Mo., teenage girl joins a weightlifting class out of summer boredom. Many features on NPR also use this structure.

Give students 6 to 10 index cards. Label these cards: “Introduction,” “First Quarter,” “Second Quarter,” “Third Quarter,” “Fourth Quarter” and “Conclusion.” Teachers will give instructions and tell when to switch to the next cards. Students are to record the content of each segment and elements of a feature presented. After the audio has been heard, students should review their notes and the “Basic Structure of a Feature.” Does the feature they heard follow the outline and meet the purpose of each quarter? Looking at the piece as a whole what would not have worked if something had been left out or moved to another order?

Have students move the note cards into a different order. What would happen to the flow of the piece with this change? Can they find any other structure that would be as strong as the current feature? Would improve the feature?

Features provide a human face to facts, numbers and statistics

6. The anecdotal lead used in Wall Street Journal page one features serve the purpose of humanizing stories that are heavy in numbers, statistics and economics terminology and concepts. Listeners of radio do not have the luxury of rereading paragraphs to understand concepts. Discuss ways in which features bring alive facts and statistics over the air. Radio does not have the visual advantage of television's charts, photographs, home movies or other visual appeals to the emotions. Radio must use actualities, sound and well-written scripts to convey the drama and impact in these details and numbers.

Select a feature that serves this purpose on a current issue.

Features have different script styles and techniques.

7. Features are descriptive, informative, and less "newscast sounding" in their writing style. Below are some other categories that features might fall into. An example is given for each, but teachers are encouraged to find other examples from local stations.

- News Peg
2005 Oklahoma Associated Press, Feature Reporting, Second Place
KGOU, Scott Gurian, "Tattoo Legalization"
(www.kgou.org/content/mp3/20050315_tattoo_mix_down.mp3)
- Explanatory
2006 Edward R. Murrow, Feature Reporting — Region 12
"Scary Clown" (www.wtop.com/index.php?nid=94&sid=828370)
A piece on coulrophobia, the fear of clowns. A trip to a clown convention, light-hearted look at what makes people afraid of clowns.
- Experience an Event (importance of sound and specific examples)
2006 Edward R. Murrow, Use of Sound — Region 2
"County Fair" (www.kcbs.com/pages/27316.php)
- Audio Diary
A number of the Radio Rookie selections are in this format of recording events and actions from the narrator's point of view, his personal reactions and how he perceives others.

Use the deconstruction method to talk about the structure and intent of radio features. By the end of the week, students should have heard and dissected at least 10 different features and heard several different approaches in the audio styles in which the producers chose to tell them.

8. After reviewing examples of features, affirm the purpose of the feature. You might use the following quotation as a springboard. Laurence Gilliam, a former Head of BBC Features Department, as quoted in Radio Production states this purpose of the feature:

It can take the enquiring mind, the alert ear, the selective eye, and the broadcasting microphone into every corner of the contemporary world, or into the deepest recess of experience. Its task and its destiny is to mirror the true inwardness of its subject, to explore the boundaries of radio and television, and to perfect techniques for the use of the creative artist in broadcasting.

9. After you have presented “Elements of the Sports Feature” and “Facing Public Affairs” lessons, assign the final project for this term. Give students “Radio Broadcast II, Third Term Project: Write and Produce a Feature.” We are suggesting that students research and produce either a sports feature or a public affairs feature for the end-of-term project:

- **The sports feature option**

If students elect to produce a sports feature, remind them that they can include actualities from interviews, anecdotes and recorded events. If someone else recorded the event that they are using, they must give credit to the source. They must set a scene, get ambience, tell a story through individuals, and have as much of a news peg as possible. Their feature should not be conceived in a vacuum, but must spring from a news event or relevant current event issue.

- **The public affairs option**

If students elect to produce a public affairs feature, they may use the material that they gathered in the “Facing Public Affairs” lesson to complete the process. At the end of that lesson each group will have three 5-minute interviews. They can take advantage of the critiques they received to improve the interview tapes. We encourage this to be an individual project, but teachers may decide to have groups continue to work together to complete the public affairs feature they began. They can use these three interviews to produce a feature-length piece with whatever addition tape they need to get, or start from scratch on the topic – something they are already familiar with because of their work on the previous lesson.



Homework

If your students have Internet access at home, ask them to read *The Pen Is Easier Than the Mic*, a personal account of producing a feature (www.transom.org/tools/beginnings/2006/200602_bill_mckibben/). The site also includes Bill McKibben’s *Gourmet* magazine article that resulted from the same interview that aired on radio.

Students may be asked to listen to features from a list provided by teachers or to their own choice of sites and stations. They might be asked to outline the structure used, its content and impact on the listener or to create a reference file of approaches to the audio feature (type, paragraph of explanation), pro and con of each approach and the URL of an example of each approach.

Teachers could ask each student to select a feature from a list of pre-selected Web sites. Each student must note the website, feature title and producer. After listening to the features, they are to analyze the structure used to present content and prepare short presentations of the feature for the next class period. By carefully preparing the list, teachers will insure a variety in the approaches presented so the entire class is exposed to more examples. Encourage students to comment and add their critiques after each student presentation.



Assessment

Students will participate during in-class activities and discussion.

This lesson provides the foundation for the Second course, Third grading period end-of-term project. See “Radio Broadcast II, Third Term Project: Write and Produce a Feature” for evaluation guidelines. That project will reflect students’ understanding of the purpose, structure and content of features.



Academic Content Standards

Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes. (Standard 5, NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts)

Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience. (Standard 7, NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts)

Analyze the effect on the reader’s or viewer’s emotions of text and image in print journalism, and images, sound, and text in electronic journalism, distinguishing techniques used in each to achieve these effects. (10.M.2)



Industry Standards and Expectations

Locate, organize and reference written information from various sources to communicate with co-workers and clients/participants. (F02.2, Career Cluster Project: Communications Skills)

Demonstrate writing audio scripts for various types of programs. (Performance Element, Pathway KS Statement: Apply Knowledge of equipment and skills related to audio production, States’ Career Clusters, National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium)

Develop and deliver formal and informal presentations using appropriate media to engage and inform audiences. (F02.4, Career Cluster Project: Communications Skills)

Apply knowledge of audio equipment for productions, including basic recording equipment, equalizers, mixing consoles, and quality-monitoring equipment. (Performance Element, Pathway KS Statement: Apply Knowledge of equipment and skills related to audio production, States’ Career Clusters, National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium)

Feature Vocabulary

Anecdote	A short account of an interesting incident, humorous event or personal experience
Feature	<p>A report or human-interest story that may spring off the news.</p> <p>A report that covers an event, a story, an issue, a person (including a profile) that is basically softer in its news value, that gives depth and perspective to events, the arts and science.</p> <p>A special report that provides background about a larger issue</p> <p>A prominent or special story handled in a straightforward manner. Its format is not news, interview or discussion.</p>
Featurette	Package material dealing with a subject in greater depth than a single interview would allow. According to Robert McLeish in Radio Production, “the general form is either person centered (‘Our guest this week is ...’), place centered (‘This week we visit ...’), or topic centered (‘This week our subject is ...’).”
Human Interest	Presenting people and their problems, concerns and achievements in a manner that arouses interest or sympathy; relating to people’s lives and emotions. A human-interest feature can have a news peg but its angle highlights the impact on human life.
Montage	A composite of closely juxtaposed voices. The audio montage may also juxtapose sounds and sound effects to convey a mood, create an attitude or enhance a theme.
Profile	A feature that focuses on an individual

Basic Structure of a Feature

Name _____ Date _____

Use this basic structure to outline your feature.

Introduction _____ seconds

States the relevance or indicates/infers the news peg.
Sets up this story as shedding background on a news item.
Sets up this story to entertain, inspire, or inform the listener.

First quarter of the piece _____ seconds

Introduces listeners to a place; sets a scene.
Tells listeners something emotional about the main character or community in the story.

Second quarter _____ seconds

Provides context as to news or community culture.
Expert placed here if needed.

Third quarter _____ seconds

Broadens the story to other relevant people, the larger community.

Fourth quarter _____ seconds

Advances the story in its outcome in relation to the main people or place profiled.
Compelling actuality is placed here.

Conclusion _____ seconds

Tells what happened to the subject, current state of the issue.
Updates information that pertains to the future of this topic.