

Script: Feature Writing
Faculty member: Heather Lamb

Slide 2

Before we can talk about feature writing, it is crucial to understand that reporting is the foundation of all great features. Without it, a writer does not have the tools he or she needs to build a feature story.

Some writers live by a 40-40-20 rule when writing a feature. This means they spend 40% of their time doing background research to find the story idea, another 40% doing interviews and reporting, and 20% writing. This underscores the vital role of reporting in feature writing.

Slide 3

All that reporting pays off when it comes to writing, because details are fundamental.

Detail helps capture a reader's attention. It draws readers into a story and allows them to see what is going on (and sometimes hear it, smell it or taste it). Details are what allow writers to "show not tell."

Slide 4

To gather details, conduct interviews in person so you can see the people and places you're reporting about. How else would you know that the CEO of the local electric company drinks coffee from a mug that reads "I love solar power"?

Slide 5

It also is essential to gather more details than necessary. Record everything. Shoot photos. Ask a lot questions. Take notes. You won't know until it's time to write what details you need. Some editors drive this point home by advising writers to always get the name of the dog. In other words, collect all the details.

Slide 6

Finding the theme

Once a writer has completed research and reporting, it's time to figure out what it all means. Ask yourself: What is the story really about? Finding this theme is a critical, but often overlooked, step in the feature writing process.

For instance, if the feature is about a person with a fatal illness, the theme might be courage in the face of tragedy or the shifting role of modern medicine. Same subject, but different themes.

Slide 7

Taking the time to determine the theme before writing helps in two vital ways: It provides focus for the story and guidance for your writing.

Because you've gathered a lot of details while reporting, establishing the theme helps make decisions about what details to include in the final story. If it doesn't support the story you're trying to tell, it gets cut.

A side benefit of a theme is that it gives the story broader context and meaning. It extends the story beyond the individuals you've interviewed and helps it connect with more readers because it addresses a larger theme.

Slide 8

Establishing setting and character

Just like a good fiction story, setting and character are important elements in feature writing.

Creating a setting relies on the writer's skills of observation and interviewing. For instance, take note of what the subject's front porch looks like, or the sounds you hear in the neighborhood; ask about the piece of tape covering their doorbell or antique car in the garage. Renowned writer Mike Sager calls this method seeing like a movie camera.

Establishing a setting also sets the mood of the story. Is it somber or triumphant? Quiet or flashy? Write down plenty of details during reporting so you can strike the proper mood when writing.

Slide 9

Once you've established the setting, it's time to work on characters. Characters, or people, should be at the heart of every feature. Creating strong characters makes feature stories more relatable.

To create characters, use the details you've gathered during reporting to introduce the people in your story and make them real.

Slide 10

One technique is the use of anecdotes. Anecdotes are little stories within the big story. They illustrate a general topic with a specific example. Using anecdotes allows a writer to show the characters in the story doing something. And in the process, anecdotes add credibility and believability, and readers remember the story better.

Slide 11

Using dialogue and action

Building on the importance of character, you can add depth to your characters by including dialogue and action. These classic storytelling elements help transform a feature article into a feature story.

Slide 12

Dialogue is just what it sounds like: conversation. Dialogue in feature writing expands beyond the traditional way quotes are used in news writing. Including conversations between two subjects provides more information about the characters' interaction than a stand-alone quote.

Dialogue accomplishes several goals. It adds change of pace to the writing. It conveys the human and emotional side of the characters. It provides action to move the story along and it conveys personality and authenticity.

Slide 13

Another way to convey character is action. What are the people in the story doing? Including action propels the narrative forward, and also shows more details about the characters.

Slide 14

Descriptive language, similes and metaphors

And now we get down to the actual language a writer uses to write the story.

To do this, remember the basics reviewed in previous sections, namely reporting, interviewing and observation. These three skills helped you gather the details needed to write descriptive language.

Slide 15

Verbs are a good place to start. They play a key role in descriptive language because verbs show rather than tell. For example, does the subject strut or does he scurry? With one word, a verb shows both action and character.

Whenever possible, select active verbs and avoid constructions of "to be."
For instance "she hurried" vs. "she was in a hurry."

Verbs should provide the foundation for descriptive language. Add adjectives to enrich descriptions. The aim is to write about the people and settings in a way that helps a reader see what is going on.

Slide 16

One common technique for descriptive language is the use of similes and metaphors. A simile draws a comparison between two things. A metaphor makes a comparison but asserts that one of the things is the other. Both similes and metaphors create visual, familiar comparisons that convey meaning for readers.