

# Do the *Write* Thing

The Basics of News-Feature Writing

By Bobby Hawthorne  
Austin, TX 2007

# The Essentials

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Find the story.

Look for an angle.

Focus on the theme.

Build the story on strong quotes

Finish with a bang.

## **LOOK FOR THE STORY**

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- Here's the fact: Freshman Helen Breyer placed first in a national writing competition and was named "Most Philosophical Eighth Grader in the United States." .
- Here's the story: Helen is legally blind.

## **SHORT ITEM NEWS**

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### ■ Traditional Inverted Pyramid

Freshman Helen Breyer placed first among 5,000 entrants in the contest in the National Poetry Slam.

“I’m in shock,” said Breyer, who submitted her entry last fall. “I can’t believe I won.”

“This is an inspiration for all of us,” Principal Bruce Whitehead told the assembly.

## **SHORT ITEM NEWS**

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### ■ Alternative copy

#### National Poetry Slam

What: Kids Philosophy Slam

When: last fall

Where: San Francisco

Who placed: freshman Lauren Beyer, first.

## **Freshman chosen as nation's most philosophical 8th grader**

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Lauren Beyer looked inside herself last fall and discovered the Most Philosophical Eighth-Grader in the United States.

Then she forgot about it for half a year.

So it came as a complete surprise Thursday when freshman English teacher Sue Rowe announced Beyer's victory in the national Kids Philosophy Slam before 500 schoolmates in the school gym. Rowe admitted she'd forgotten too until a letter came announcing Beyer was a winner.

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The contest asked children throughout the nation to answer the question “What is more important in your life: Truth or beauty?” Beyer took a minute to review her poem, which she hadn’t touched for months.

Touched — because her poem was written in Braille. When she wrote “Outside beauty does not matter to me,” her thoughts carried the raw authority of an 11-year-old who truly cannot see.

While Beyer said she has no particular favorite poets or singers for inspiration, she regularly composes her own poems for Mother’s Day and Christmas cards.

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“Something will just hit me, and I’ll get on the computer and type it out,” Beyer said. “For this one, I started writing about truth, but then got this feeling that I should switch it around.”

Rowe said she learned about the contest from her sister, a fellow teacher in Portland, Ore. It seemed like a fun project to coax some writing out of her students, while introducing the idea of thinking about philosophy.

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Kids Philosophy Slam has been around since 1993, when founder John Davis created the Great American Think-Off. It offers a new question each year, with entries from kindergarten through high school. Last year, there were more than 5,000 entries in all grades.

Beyer received a medal, plaque and T-shirt commemorating her entry.

“This is an inspiration for all of us,” Principal Bruce Whitehead told the assembly. “This shows you what you can do in your classrooms when you write. This shows how you can change people’s lives every day.”

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Shades and colors are not important to me.  
Not the blues of the sea,  
Or the reds of a sunset,  
And not the purples of the mountain.  
Those are not where the beauty is.  
Outside beauty does not matter to me, for I can not  
see.  
If you see inside, you will see a true beauty.  
Look into the heart.  
Do not wait to start.  
That is where the true beauty is kept.

## **Always look for story**

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What is your piece really about? Separate data from story. Every quote, anecdote, descriptive scene, fact must support the theme. Any information that does not advance the theme should be omitted.

# **Great American Smokeout scheduled next week**

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The Great American Smokeout is scheduled for next week. Sponsored by the American Cancer Society, the purpose of the Great American Smokeout is to convince smokers to give up cigarettes for one day in the hope that they will kick the habit permanently.

“We want to convince young people not to smoke,” coach Bill Smith said.

Bill revealed that he is a former smoker himself and he said he does not want students to go through the same things he went through.

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“If you’re smoking, stop now,” he said. “If you’re not smoking, don’t start. Smoking is dumb.”

Bill is assistant football coach and head track coach. He also teaches biology. Last year’s track team finished second at the State Meet.

“None of them boys smoked,” Smith said. “At least, not while they were running.”

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He and his wife both graduated from the University of Texas. They have two children: Heather, 19, and Scott, 17. Heather is a sophomore nursing major at UT. Scott is a senior, an Eagle Scout and a 3-sport athlete.

“I’m proud of my daddy for helping to keep our school free from tobacco,” Scott said. “As an Eagle Scout and an athlete, I appreciate how important good health is to each of us. If you have your health, you have it all.”

## **Keys to Successful Features**

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- Find the right person
- Ask the obvious questions.
- Get that person's story
- Write a compelling lead
- Tell the story in a logical order
- Build the story on strong quotes
- End with a bang

# One from the heart

## Smith leading school's anti-smoking crusade

As a young coach, Bill Smith would puff down three or four packs of Winstons a day.

"It's how I dealt with stress," he said. "Some days, the pressure of the job was so great, I'd have two cigarettes going at the same time."

But all that ended three days after his 45th birthday. He had a heart attack and underwent open-heart surgery to repair arteries, constricted after years of smoking.

When: Dec. 2-6

What: Great American Smokeout

Key Event: 10 a.m. assembly, Monday

Also: banners, posters, balloons and anti-smoking literature will be distributed next week.

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“I was sitting in the hospital bed and thought about my family, that I’d never watch my daughter graduate from high school or kiss my grandchildren, and I cried and vowed to never touch another cigarette,” Smith said. “And I haven’t.”

That was five years ago. Not only has he kicked the habit, Smith is encouraging others to do the same. He is the catalyst behind the school’s annual observance of the Great American Smokeout.

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“I started smoking when I was 14,” Smith said. “I thought it was cool. Pretty soon, I realized how disgusting a habit smoking is, but I was hooked. I was a young coach, under a lot of stress, and I couldn’t quit.”

In 2000, Smith underwent triple bypass surgery. Doctors took six inches of artery from his legs to replace the clogged blood vessels near his heart.

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“I remember thinking as they wheeled me into surgery, ‘I’m too young to be doing this.’” Smith said.

He added he hopes it won’t take surgery to convince others to quit.

“Smoking is dumb,” he said. “But if anyone needs a little additional incentive to quit, I can show them a pretty nasty scar on my chest.”

## **Angle**

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Does the reporter attempt to tell a new story through a new point of view or perspective, or does he/she rely on clichés or statements of the obvious?

## **Don't state the obvious**

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The weather will soon turn cooler and the leaves will start to fall, and that means the arrival of football season. Fans are important to the success of the team because they cheer for the players and support them even when they lose. Coach Harvey Newell said the fans are an important part of the team.

“Speaking for the players and coaches, we appreciate the support of our loyal fans and hope everyone will come to the game and cheer us,” he said, “on to victory.”

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Leading the fans are the cheerleaders.

“It’s so important for our team that everyone come to the pep rallies and the games and scream real loud and participate in our cheers so that the players will know we’re behind them win or lose,” head cheerleader Penny Pell said.

When asked, students said they enjoyed going to games and cheering for the team.

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“It is fun to go to the games and watch the boys play,” said freshman Becky Heller.

“Since I’m too uncoordinated to play, I feel it is my duty as a loyal athletic supporter to go to all of the games,” sophomore Buck Ender said.

So come on out to the games and join us as we cheer the team on to another grand and glorious victory, ya’ll!!

## **Another football season...**

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The first game he attended, the players wore leather helmets and played in an old cow pasture. Sixty-three years and hundreds of games later, Don Simpson is gearing up for another football season.

“I ain’t missed but one game since 1938, and that’s hard for some people to imagine, but I’ve been healthy and in town, so I never saw a reason not to go,” said Simpson, a retired engineer whose three sons played for the Bulldogs back in the 1960s. His youngest son, Heath, quarterbacked the 1968 Bulldogs to their only state football championship.

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“I saw my first game when I was 7 years old and from that moment on, Bulldog football was my passion,” Simpson said. “I played for four years here — four of the worst teams in the school’s history, I might add — and then went to school over at Fairview so that I’d be close enough to home to go to all the games.”

Every game except one.

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“My senior year in college, I was married and my wife was expecting our first child,” he said. “She was getting real close to delivering, so I decided it would be best if I stayed home rather than going to the game. Good thing too. My son was born at 2:30 that morning, and we lost the game anyway. I’m just glad that the one game I missed was a loss rather than a win. I’d hate to think that I missed a game that we won.”

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Simpson served 16 years on the school board and was president of the Football Booster Club for eight years.

“I don’t miss all of that a bit,” he said. “But when I get tired of going to games is when they’ll need to plant me six feet under. I may be just another old fool, but I love them Bulldogs.”

# **It works because...**

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- Interesting lead
- Great subject
- Powerful and deep quotes
- Logical, smooth flow
- Strong closing

## **Focus**

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Does the reporter keep the story focused on the theme? Or does the reporter dump unrelated information into the article just to fill up space?

## **This is a rodeo!**

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If you've stayed up late watching television, and what teenager hasn't, you might have seen a rodeo, even though you were looking for re-runs of *Sex and the City* or *Will & Grace*.

Well, if you did see a rodeo, you probably noticed that cowboys were riding on the backs of mad bulls and wild horses, and that clowns were running around, keeping the bulls from kicking the cowboys in the head. This is a rodeo. We have a budding rodeo star right here in our midst at Daniel Boone High School.

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History teacher Billy Don Gregory has been in rodeo all of his life. His favorite sport is bull riding. The purpose of bull riding is to stay on the bull as long as possible.

“It is a lot of fun and every exciting,” Gregory said. “I do enjoy it. It also helps pay the bills also though I once got hurt pretty bad doing it.”

Gregory is one of the most popular teachers at DBHS. He has a great sense of humor, students say.

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“He is very funny and keeps his classes upbeat,” junior Melissa Jones said. “His stories about being a cowboy are priceless. He has a great sense of humor.”

So when you see a rodeo on television, don't change that dial! You just might see Gregory roping and riding for big bucks on ESPN one of these days. And who knows, maybe one day, he'll be on Will & Grace too.

## **...to get back on another bull**

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Billy Don Gregory looked down at his right hand, callused from more bull rides than he can count.

“It don’t bend like I want it to,” he said.

The reason is that it was nearly ripped off five years ago when a bull fell on him, jerking his hand against the rope wrapped around it. He was left with a nasty scar around most of his right wrist from surgery to reattach it — and a desire to get back on another bull.

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“I couldn’t see myself not riding bulls,” Gregory said. “I may be crazy but I’m having fun.”

It was nearly midnight, Oct. 8, 1999 at Billy Bob’s Texas in Fort Worth when Gregory mounted the bull that almost cost him his hand. It was the last ride of the night, and the bull let Gregory know immediately that it wasn’t going to be an easy ride, he recalled. The bull bucked several times while still in the chute, finally rearing back so far that he fell backwards, penning Gregory on the ground and yanking his hand against the rope.

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“I prayed to God all the way to the hospital to save my hand,” Gregory said. “I couldn’t picture myself with a hook on the end of my arm.”

The immediate prognosis from a team of doctors at John Peter Smith Hospital wasn’t good.

“They said my hand couldn’t be saved. I said, ‘I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you try.’ They tried and did it. I could hug them every day.”

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Doctors told him to stay off bulls for at least three years. But he was back on them seven months later, riding left-handed. After two months, he tried it right-handed.

“I’ll have to admit I was a little scared,” he said. “But once this bull-riding bug gets in your blood, it’s hard to shake it. My chances of making it to the big time are not very good now, what with this bum hand. But I still get a kick out of climbing on the back of a bull and as long as my wife lets me, I’ll be riding them.”

# **A good story...**

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- tells the reader something new
- explains what something means
- reveals humanity, personality
- finds the interesting point of view

## **What's the impact?**

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In a story about teacher funding cuts, examine how this proposal would affect YOUR SCHOOL. Talk to teachers and tell their specific stories. The impact on an English teacher who is expected to grade term papers may be much different than on a math teacher. Show the differences.

## **‘Either way, kids lose’**

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Janice Knight teaches four AP English classes per day. Each class contains at least 25 students. On any given night, she spends two or three hours grading essays or writing assignments.

“You can’t zip writing through some machine like it’s a multiple choice quiz,” she said. “You have to read it and comment on every line. Unless you just skim it for spelling and grammatical errors, it takes a lot of time.”

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A school board plan to petition the state education agency for a waiver to allow more students per class angers her, she said, because “if they allow classes to get larger, the school won’t hire enough teachers, and my class size will increase. That means I either burn out quicker or cut back the quality of instruction I can offer my students. Either way, kids lose.”

This reaction is common among teachers here to the proposal...

## **Explain what it means**

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Readers probably know that a bond election was passed. What they may not know is what it means. Why it was necessary? How will it improve education at your school? How will it make life better for teachers and students? Rather than the typical news approach, use something like this . . .

## **On his own turf...**

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French teacher John Baker is accustomed to bouncing around from classroom to classroom but that doesn't mean he likes it.

“I never had my own room, and I couldn't do the things in class I want to do,” he said. “I couldn't put up posters or assignment sheets. I was always operating on someone else's turf.”

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That's about to change. Within the next year, Baker is expected to occupy one of the six new rooms that will be built as part of the bond election improvement plan.

“With my own classroom, I can do more interesting activities that require props,” he said. “I could never do that before.”

Among the other improvements scheduled are...

# **Your story must be...**

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- Accurate
- Clean/Correct
- Smooth
- Clear
- Tight
- Unified

**For more great examples...**

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THE *Radical Write*

By BOBBY HAWTHORNE

Available from the  
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