

Feature Writing



By Jeanne Acton, UIL/ILPC Journalism Director

Feature Writing ...

tells the reader a story. It has a beginning (lead), middle and end. It uses quotes liberally and allows the reader to see the story through detailed description and vivid writing.

Transition/Quote Formula

Linked

Lead: Most interesting information. Something that will grab the reader's attention and drag them into the story.

Nut Graph: A summary of what the story is going to be about. Why the story is important.

Direct Quote: Connects to the nut graph. Use more than one sentence. Direct quotes should show the emotion of the story.

Linked

Transition: Next important fact. Use transition words to help the story flow. They can be facts, indirect quotes or partial quotes.

Direct Quote: Connects to the first transition. Do not repeat the transition in the quote. DQ should elaborate on the transition.

Linked

Transition: Next important fact. Use transition words to help the story flow. They can be facts, indirect quotes or partial quotes.

Direct Quote: Connects to the second transition. Do not repeat the transition in the quote. DQ should elaborate on the transition.

And so on... until the story is complete

Let's start at the
beginning with ...

LEADS



Leads

The opening sentence must grab and hold the reader's attention by using specific, interest-arousing words.

Leads

The lead must catch the spirit of the story and create the proper tone: serious, sarcastic, ironic, flippant, melancholy.

Leads

- **Can be and often are longer than one sentence**
- **Your chance to grab the reader's attention**
- **Should be specific to your story**
- **Should not be filled with cliches**
- **Should be in third person**
- **Must fit the mood or tone of the story**

A Few Types of Leads

- Narrative - tells a story
- Descriptive - describes a scene, person or subject
- Direct Quote – must be used with narrative
- Startling statement
- Contrast and Compare (then and now)
- Twist

Narrative - tells a story

Justin Greer's 2,800 friends have never seen him cry. His father has seen him cry only once — the day last October when doctors told the 16-year-old football player that what he thought was a bad case of the flu was actually leukemia.

“He cried a bit then,” Mr. Greer said. “But then he squared off and said, ‘Well, I’m not dead yet.’ And I haven’t seen him cry since, although he’s told me that sometimes he cries at night when he’s all alone.”

Narrative - tells a story

On senior Alicia Brigg's two-hour trip with her parents to church, she turned around and noticed that in the back of the Suburban all her bags were packed.

“All of the sudden, I realized I wasn't going to church; I was on my way to the airport,” she said. “I started screaming, crying and swearing at my dad, trying to figure out what was happening.”

That's when her dad told his 17-year-old daughter he had put her up for adoption.

Descriptive - describes a scene/person

It is 7:30 Thursday night and the Presbyterian Church of Utica is deserted except for its well-lit cafeteria.

Slowly they straggle in, single or in pairs. They are a friendly, yet haggard group, bearing the signs of a long emotional struggle.

They are the parents of problem teenagers. There are no straight-A-honor roll students here. No football captains or cheerleaders. Only drug addicts, alcoholics and runaways.

Descriptive

It's too disturbing to watch the big screen TV at his cousin's house. Too soon. Too real.

Instead, using his index fingers, Joshua Joseph twiddles a Dove soap box, the one he used to scribble telephone numbers on when he was evacuating.

He flips the box around. There's his girlfriend's number. Backward.

His best friend's digits.

Forward.

His coach's number.

This is Joseph's cell phone now. His real one is lost, somewhere back in New Orleans along with most of his clothes, his family's house and life as he knew it.

Descriptive - describes a scene or person

Standing in the lunch line, the boy turned to April Haler and asked, “Will you be my girlfriend?”

Then he turned to his buddy and started laughing.

Just another cruel joke on the fat kid.

April, who once weighed almost 300 pounds, is used to them. Since elementary school she has been teased and taunted about her weight.

“I remember being called horrible names in elementary school every time we went to the playground,” the sophomore said.

But life is changing.

Descriptive - describes a scene or person

Sarah Clark knows what they think. The smirks. The laughs. The way the other girls, all week long in cheerleading practice, have been rolling their eyes.

They think she's a joke.

They think she's a big fat joke of an eighth grader with no prayer of becoming a high school cheerleader.

Minutes before her tryout, Sarah paces the corridor. She sweeps the waves of her long copper hair back over her shoulder. She tugs up on her socks and down on her cheerleader skirt, pressed the night before.

Then, with her eyes open and in the privacy of her mind, she mutters a prayer.

Dear God, please ...

By 8 p.m. she' ll have her answer.

Direct Quote - use sparingly. Must be very powerful quote

“Don‘t be mad. I took some pills,” Karen Keaton cried as she stooped over the toilet.

A few hours later, the 14-year-old freshman died after a series of coronary arrests.

Direct Quote - use sparingly.

“Coach Hawkins!”

Brad Hawkins, the longtime Westlake athletic trainer, recognized Coach Steven Ramsey’s voice over the noise of the spectators behind him. But he had never heard Ramsey’s voice like that.

Hawkins ran to Ramsey, who was crouched over varsity player Matt Nader pleading with the athlete.

“Hang in there.”

“Don’t leave us.”

“Everything’s going to be all right.”

Startling Statement - creates drama

She never knew she had it.

Junior Josh Duckworth has a fetish.

Startling Statement/Narrative/Descriptive

Zackary Jargowsky hates pronouns.

He hates the “she” that sometimes slips out when he’s playing Quidditch with his friends, and the “it” he’s been labeled by the ones who don’t understand.

He hates the prolonged stares as people try to figure out what is going on beneath his “Nightmare Before Christmas” hoodie and plaid, vertical striped shirts — the ones the stylist said would help.

Startling Statement - creates drama

Melissa hates school.

It's not that she's dumb. It isn't that she doesn't fit in socially. In fact, it isn't that anything is particularly wrong.

It's more of a matter of nothing being particularly right.

Twist - sets reader up for one mood and then twists it, surprises the reader

A group of candystripers stand around the nursery, holding incubator babies. It's "loving time." Another young girl steps in with her mother and picks up a baby, too. She is not in a uniform, but in a hospital gown, for the baby she holds is her own — and it's her "loving time."

It's also time to say good-bye.

"I sat in that rocker and held him and rocked him and I cried and cried and cried," Amber, a senior, said. "I wanted that moment to last forever so I could always hold him and always be there for him."

"But I knew I couldn't. That's what hurt."

Twist

How many children do you have?

A simple question. Unassuming. Perfect for small talk.

But Jim and Julie Silcock stumble.

Dec. 29, 2002 flashes in front of them. And they don't know what to do.

Haltingly, Julie responds. *We have one son named James. He is a junior at Princeton.*

But the questions don't end there. For the past six years, they never have.

Another Twist

After tension-filled hours of last-minute primping, the time had come for the contestants to walk into the arena and strut their stuff in front of the three judges and an appreciative crowd.

Some walked briskly with an air of confidence. Others, distracted by the lights and cameras, shuffled along slowly. A few, overcome by the pressure, foamed at the mouth and moaned.

Even though Saturday's market steer competition at the Austin-Travis County Livestock Show and Rodeo was like many other beauty pageants, there were some obvious differences.

The contestants — steers weighing more than half a ton — were being judged on the type of T-bones and rump roasts they would turn into instead of their appearance in an evening gown or bathing suit.

A few more good ones ...

By his own admission, Adan Peña was a lousy student. Lazy. Apathetic. A typical junior high slacker. He was heading in the direction of dropping out of school and into a life of who knows what — at best, working on a dairy farm. At worst, jail.

A few more good ones ...

Louis Staggers smiles all the time. Not often. All. The. Time.

“Louis is that kid who walks the hallway with the biggest smile on his face,” says John Osborn, head basketball coach at Belton High School.

Writing devices for leads

- Repetition (Melissa)
- Short, punchy sentences. Fragments. (Joshua, Louis)
- Using dialogue (adoption, Matt)
- Mixing sentence length to set a rhythm (adopt, rodeo)
- Breaking the rules ... starting with “And”

The **lead** should open
with the specific,
then go to the general.

Rather than:

With America engaged in a war in Iraq, many students know U.S. military men who have lost their lives.

Leaguetown lost one of its own last month when Nicolas Barrera was killed in Iraq.

Try this:

When Briana Barrera didn't hear from her son, Nicolas, for a week she knew something was wrong. Maybe it was mother's intuition, but she knew.

And when she saw two officers walking toward her door, her worst fear was confirmed.

“The officers said they were sorry to deliver the news, but Nicolas died with honor,” she said.

“Dying with honor? How does that help? My heart was breaking. My boy was gone.”

Lead writing pitfalls:

- News or editorials leads. Avoid first and second person.
- Stating the obvious.
- Using cliches.
- “Imagine this...” leads

No news or editorials leads. Avoid first and second person

Freshman Sarah Clark made the cheerleader squad for the 2007-08 school year.

Congratulations to Sarah Clark for making the cheerleading squad. We are proud of her.

Don't state the obvious

Every day, millions of people wake up, go to work or go to school. But some days, they don't.

Millions of teenagers have jobs. They work for many reasons: college, cars, just to have some spending money in their pocket.

No cliches

Take one for the team.

Life is short.

And the winner is . . .

Do not “Imagine this...”

Imagine what it would be like to sit through a hurricane.

Dallas-resident Carly Patty doesn't have to. She was stranded in Galveston during Hurricane Ike.

Imagine what it would be like to be on a boat that is sinking in the middle of the ocean.

Daniel Palacios doesn't have to imagine. He was on his grandfather's boat over spring break when it capsized.

Try this instead...

Senior Daniel Palacios planned to spend spring break on a relaxing fishing trip in Port Aransas with his father, grandfather and two uncles. Instead, he spent most of the week praying to stay alive.

What's next?



After a strong lead...

**You need a strong nut
graph.**

What is a nut graph?

Basically, it is a summary of what the story is going to be about. It's the 5 Ws and H that you didn't answer in the lead.

It's the thesis sentence of your story.

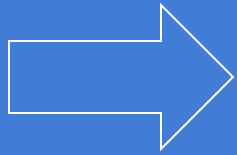
Senior Daniel Palacios planned to spend spring break on a relaxing fishing trip in Port Aransas with his father, grandfather and two uncles. Instead, he spent most of the week praying to stay alive.

On the second night of Daniel's family fishing trip, his grandfather's boat filled with water and capsized. For three days, Daniel sat on top of the capsized boat, hoping he and his family would be rescued.

"I don't know if I have ever prayed so much in my life," Daniel said. "I made a few bargains with God during those three days."

On the third day, after the Coast Guard called off its search, a fishing boat found the men.

"It was a miracle," Daniel said. "As soon as we were rescued, we all got on our knees to pray and thank God."



The Nut Graph

What's next?



**After a strong lead and an
informative nut graph...**

**Use the Transition/Quote
formula**

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transition

direct quote

transition

On April 2, Daniel will share his miracle story when he and his family go on the “Today Show.”

direct quote

“I am a little hesitant to go on the ‘Today Show,’” Daniel said. “I am a pretty shy guy, and I don’t relish the spotlight. My grandparents love that show, though. My dad and I knew it would be a highlight of my grandpa’s life if he was on the show.”

transition

Daniel’s “miracle” story began on March 11 when his grandfather’s boat started sinking.

direct quote

“We tried to pump the water out, but the pumps wouldn’t start,” he said. “It took about three hours for the boat to fill and capsize. My grandfather fired off three flares, hoping a nearby oil rig would see us, but no one came.”

transition

As the boat filled with water, Daniel’s father passed out life jackets.

direct quote

“He said the plan was to sit on top of the boat until we were rescued,” he said. “My dad managed to get several packages of crackers and candy bars into a bag just as the boat was capsizing.”

**So how do you end
a feature story?**



End your story with ..

- A powerful quote

Or

- Tie the ending back to the lead

For example:

(Lead) “Don’t be mad. I took some pills,” Karen Keaton cried as she stooped over the toilet.

A few hours later, the 14-year-old freshman died after a series of coronary arrests.

(Ending) Since the death of her oldest daughter, the Keatons have found themselves becoming more protective. “I find myself watching for things,” Mrs. Keaton said. “I’m not sure for what. I’m just watching.”

For example:

(Lead) A group of candystripers stand around the nursery, holding incubator babies. It's "loving time." Another young girl steps in with her mother and picks up a baby, too. She is not in a uniform, but in a hospital gown, for the baby she holds is her own — and it's her "loving time."

It's also time to say good-bye.

"I sat in that rocker and held him and rocked him and I cried and cried and cried," Amber, a senior, said. "I wanted that moment to last forever so I could always hold him and always be there for him."

"But I knew I couldn't. That's what hurt."

(Ending) This was evident as she stated the one word that described the whole ordeal:

“Pain,” she said, tears streaming down her cheeks and falling onto her sweater.

“True pain.”

For a Strong Feature Story
remember this ...

GQ STUDD

G Great

Q Quotes

S Strong Lead

T Transition/Quote Formula

U Unique Angle

D Description - Show Don't Tell

D Detail

Yes, you can ...

- Use the first name on the second reference if the story is about a student.
- Add plausible description to flesh out your lead
- Have a lead longer than one paragraph

Pitfalls to avoid in feature writing ...


- Using a news lead
- Writing in the passive voice
- Using too many adverbs and adjectives instead of specific nouns and powerful verbs
- Messy handwriting
- Story doesn't flow – doesn't use T/Q formula
- Lack of strong quotes

On contest day ...

 Read the entire prompt

 Take a moment. Remember what stands out to you. Try to use that for your lead.

 Reread the prompt and highlight or underline powerful quotes.

 Also, mark your nut graph (usually the news peg) in the prompt.

 Cross out any unnecessary quotes or people.

 Write.

Good luck!