



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.

Focus on action verbs and specific nouns. Limit the use of adverbs and adjectives.

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

The freshman sits in psychology class, hidden in the back row as always, relieved that no one knows who she is. She thinks about her big sister, also a psych major, who aced the last exam of her life in this building hours before she was abducted.

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.

Narrative - tells a story

D.J. carried his demons clenched in his fists. The 13-year-old lashed out at teachers, siblings and foster parents. When reprimanded for his behavior, he stared at his feet and apologized in mumbles.

D.J. needed hope. That much Andrea Calloway knew. Normal efforts to reach the boy didn't work. But Calloway knew D.J. wasn't a normal child.

When his biological parents finished beating each other, they turned to their five kids. With D.J., they punched him and told him he was worthless.

Descriptive – of a scene/person

Andrew, an electrical engineer, looks better than your average 37-year-old, college-educated man from Canton, OH. Clean-shaven, wearing a fitted maroon polo shirt and black dress pants. Athletic. Energetic. Flirtatious.

He sits on the patio of a local restaurant, sipping his cocktail, skimming the menu at the kind of place you take your kids to after soccer practice.

"Yesterday I had drink. Today I had two. Tomorrow, I don't know," Andrew says, both hands cupped around a sweaty vodka-soda with lime. "But it's not heroin."

Descriptive – of a scene/person

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 - of a scene/person

Tom McNichol has fished a lot of strange things out of Boston's Charles River. Among the most unexpected are a portable toilet, a recliner and a dead body.

Direct Quote - Must be powerful

“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.

Quote with narrative

"Don't bury me." 6-year-old Fareed Shawky cries as doctors treat the shrapnel wounds that cover his body.

He is just a child. But more than six months of war in his country, Yemen, had taught him the bitter realities of conflict. People die, then they are buried.

"Don't bury me," Fareed says again through tears.

His young father stands across from him and smiles trying to ease his child's fears.

"I was trying to calm him down and at the same time my tears are falling," al-Thamry Shawky says, "I told him, 'Don't be afraid, my son. You will get better.'"

Startling Statement

After stumbling out of the wrecked car, junior Aspen Lloyd opened the door to the backseat. Instantly, she knew he was gone.

Junior Josh Duckworth has a fetish.

Twist

Nigel Davis has had plenty of unfunny days.

A father shot. A mother taken by cancer. A childhood in the ghetto.

He served in the Persian Gulf war, worked in a mail room and waited tables at a Mexican restaurant where he hated singing Happy Birthday to customers.

He's sung in a blues band and had his heart broken after moving 1,000 miles for a woman.

But always, he's been able to make people laugh.

Another Twist

At 21, he is a grizzled thing. Sparse black hair barely covers his liver spots and flaking skin. Glaucoma and cataracts plague his eyes. Flattened hooves slow his gait to an almost crawl.

But in just two days, Potsie will be ready to party.

On Tuesday, assuming he survives that long, Potsie will win the Guinness World Record title as the oldest Vietnamese potbellied pig.

A good lead makes you want to read more ...

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.

A good lead shows drama ...

The low point came in March. Or maybe it was April. Monty Williams isn't sure. Time blurs.

For two weeks, Micah and Elijah passed the stomach flu back and forth, as 5- and 8-year-olds do. They threw up on the carpet, in the bed, on the bathroom floor. Everywhere but the toilet and trash can. Finally one night, they combined for a particularly messy episode.

Williams stumbled out to of bed and herded the boys' into the shower, then into clean pajamas and back to sleep. He longed to go back to bed, but he knew Ingrid would have never left the mess.

Writing devices for leads

- Repetition
- Short, punchy sentences. Fragments.
- Using dialogue
- Mixing sentence length to set a rhythm
- 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.”

HERE'S THE BASIC INFO...

- Proyecto Adelante is a nonprofit agency that counsels people seeking U.S. citizenship.
- You interviewed Dolly Warden, a volunteer psychologist who counsels these torture victims. She describes the stories of several of the victims.
- She is going to speak at your school next week. Your story comes out first.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

- Everyone hears stories of rape and murder from other countries. If you ever wanted to help one of these victims, you need to know about Proyecto Adelante. It is a non-profit agency that counsels people seeking U.S. citizenship.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

- You have slaved all day in a field during which the temperature reached over 100 degrees. You earned your dollar pay, but when you ask your “owner” for it, you are brutally beaten, which causes you to miss two days of work. That happens in Guatemala. Proyecto Adelante is trying to help Guatemalans escape the torture.

WHAT WENT RIGHT?

He can hear her screams, her pleas for mercy. He sees the soldiers beating her, burning circles on her arms and legs with their cigarettes. He hears her gasping for air, choking on her own tears as the soldiers circle her. He breaks down as he cries out, “They left her for dead on the streets.”

Psychologist Dolly Warden sits next to the young Guatemalan, listening, consoling, growing angrier, more bitter by the second. This is no cliché. She feels his pain. When he leaves, she slams her clipboard against a filing cabinet. She screams. Even curses.

“My God. What kind of animals are these?”

It’s a question she’s asked dozens of times since becoming a volunteer at Proyecto Adelante four years ago.

Lead writing pitfalls:

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



**No news or editorials leads.
Avoid first and second person.**

Dolly Warden will speak at the school about her job as a psychologist working with torture victims.

We are so excited that Dolly Warden is coming to our school to speak.

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.

Do not “Imagine this...”

Imagine what it would be like to be shot in the head with a 57-magnum.

Dallas-resident Carly Patty doesn't have to. Her little brother shot her in the face accidentally last summer.

Imagine what it would be like to get a life-threatening illness as a high school student. Junior Daria Bellum doesn't have to. She was diagnosed with Wegener's Granulomatosis disease last June.

Try this instead...

As the leading home run hitter for the varsity softball team, junior Daria Bellum has seen her fair share of curveballs.

But she was unprepared for the curveball life threw at her this summer.

“I thought I was going to die,” Daria said. “I was really afraid.”

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.

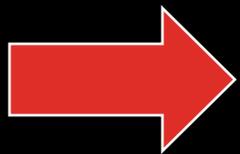
It's the thesis sentence of your story.

As the leading home run hitter for the varsity softball team, junior Daria Bellum has seen her fair share of curveballs.

But she was unprepared for the curveball life threw at her this summer.

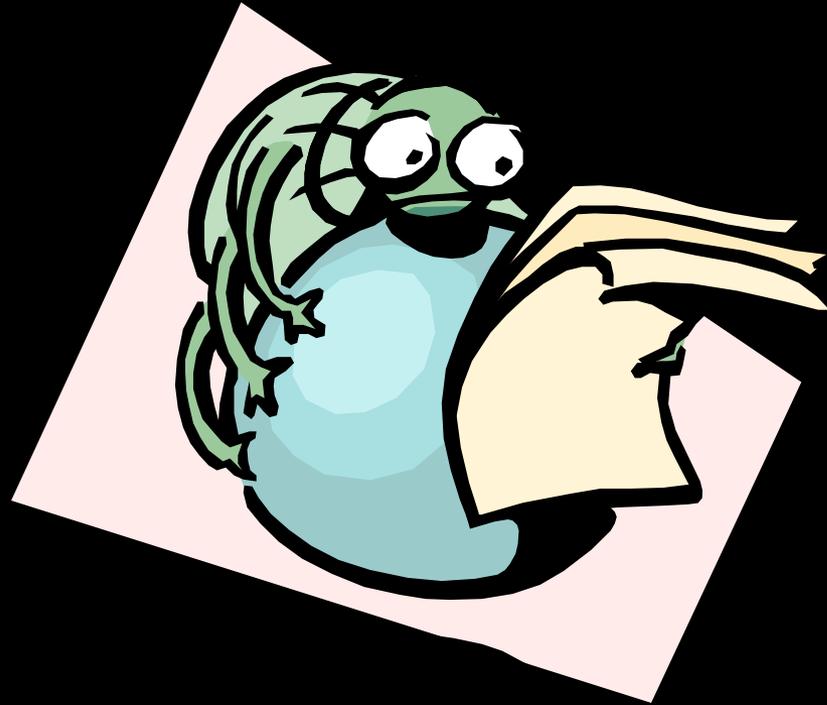
“I thought I was going to die,” Daria said. “I was really afraid.”

In June, Daria was diagnosed with Wegener’s Granulomatosis, a rare disorder that causes severe inflammation of the body’s major organ systems. The disease can be fatal if not caught early.



**The Nut
Graph**

What's next?





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

**Use the Transition/Quote
formula.**

transition

Daria's body responded to the treatment, but the doctors told Daria she would never play sports again.

direct quote

"I don't like to be told that I can't do something," Daria said. "I told the doctor he was wrong."

transition

After months of physical therapy and pushing herself, Daria proved that she was right. She is now one home run away from breaking the school record for the most home runs in a season.

direct quote

"I am not going to say the physical therapy and training was easy," she said. "It wasn't. There were many days when I doubted myself, and many days that I wanted to give up."

transition

Daria's illness started with chest pains in May. Doctors told her she had a virus, but Daria got weaker and weaker and within a week, she was unable to walk. Her parents rushed her to an emergency room in Dallas.

direct quote

"We thought we were going to lose our little girl," Daria's mother, Eve Bellum, said. "After the first round of tests in Dallas, the doctors were convinced Daria had cancer. Then, when we got the real diagnosis, it didn't sound much better. The doctors were still not convinced Daria would survive."

AILENE MACURDY, VARSITY SOFTBALL COACH

“When I visited Daria in the hospital and saw how weak and sick she was, I wasn’t sure if we would ever see her on the softball field again. But Daria proved me wrong, and I am so glad she did. **She is the rock of our team. Daria was a solid player last year, but she’s even better this year. And it’s not just her home run streak. She has not had a single error in the last seven games.**

**Where did
those
transitions
come from?**

Varsity softball coach Ailene Macurdy said Daria, who is the starting shortstop, is the “rock” of the team.

“Daria was a solid player last year, but she’s even better this year,” Macurdy said. “And it’s not just her home run streak. She has not had a single error in the last seven games.”

Intro Information

In early September, the doctors said Daria was in remission and could return to school and begin her physical therapy. Daria continues to take various drugs to prevent a relapse. Determined to get back on the softball field, Daria took her physical therapy seriously and within a month had surpassed all her doctor's expectations. By her second month of physical therapy, Daria was jogging two miles after the hour-long sessions, something her doctors didn't think she would ever be able to do again.

In early fall, Daria's doctors said she was in remission and could return to school and start physical therapy.

"I pushed myself so I could be on the field again," she said. "Ever since I was 5 years old and my mom took me to my cousin's high school softball game, I've wanted to be a softball player. I wasn't going to let this disease stop that dream."

**Where did
those
transitions
come from?**

Let's talk story flow ...

So often after the lead and nut graph, students don't master the art of flow within the story. It jumps. It disconnects. It loses the reader. Using the transition/quote formula helps, but you also need to connect your paragraphs.

It only took a moment for 10-year-old Lauren Gillies to find the words to describe her mother. "Loving. Funny. Pretty. Wonderful," the blue-eyed blonde beamed. "She was the coolest mom ever."

And she was.

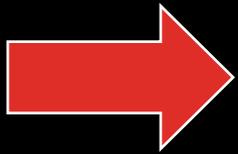
Tracy Gillies lived her life for her two girls – Lauren and four-year-old Payton. She made it fun, colorful and most of all inspiring. Each year for the girls' birthday parties, Tracy crafted creative themes and executed elaborate plans to make for an "over the top birthday party." Lauren's favorite was her fifth birthday party. Tracy hosted a pool party for Lauren and created an "awesome" birthday cake with a blue jello pool right in the middle of it. Teddy grahams sporting tiny piped-on icing bikinis and little umbrellas topped off the cake.

For Payton's third birthday, Tracy picked a zoo theme and brought a petting zoo to their backyard.

"I thought... a bunny, a chicken and maybe a small goat...after the horses and a donkey were unloaded, I think I saw an alpaca in my back yard," Jerry, her husband, said. "It wasn't your **average** petting zoo."

But **average** wasn't how anyone would describe Tracy. She did nothing small. Nothing without inspiration. She was the planner. Huge, beautifully designed, spectacular **plans**.

Unfortunately, on Dec. 31, 2012, Tracy and her family were hit with an event she didn't **plan** and one she never truly understood. Her family, including her parents and brother, is still struggling to understand today.



The Nut Graph

“For six months, she wasn’t feeling well,” Jerry said. “We knew something was wrong, but we didn’t know **what**.”

On New Year’s Eve, the Gillies family got their “**what**” — an inoperable mass in Tracy’s brain. A few days later, a **biopsy** showed a Grade 4 Glioblastoma, one of the most aggressive and deadliest brain tumors.

“After the **biopsy**, everything went downhill fast,” Jerry said. “There was nothing good the doctors could tell us.”

Within a week of the **biopsy**, Tracy was transferred to a hospice facility. The doctors said the swelling was too intense and the growth of the tumor was too fast. Nothing could be done.

“At that point, she wasn’t aware of everything,” Jerry said. “The tumor took over. She slipped in and out. The tumor devastated her short-term memory.”

transition

direct quote

transition

direct quote

Towards the end, Jerry chose a night and spent it with Tracy at the hospice facility.

“I told her everything I wanted to,” he said, tears welling in his eyes. “I think she heard me, but she couldn’t retain things.”

Tracy passed away quietly on Jan. 31, 2013 – one month after the initial diagnosis.

“She never accepted any of it,” Jerry said. “It was **too fast**. She lost too much too quickly.”

That is one of the hardest things for Jerry to live with.

“She didn’t get to leave anything for the kids,” he said. “She would have written letters for the girls. She would have **planned** for them. She would have put every last energy into the girls.”

But this horrible disease didn’t allow for any **planning**. It robbed Jerry of his young wife, the mother of his children and his best friend of **25 years**.

Tracy and Jerry **met in high school**, but it wasn’t love at first sight.

“I don’t think she really liked me much,” he said. “She was a bowhead who wore Laura Ashley dresses, and I was a meathead who worked out all the time.”



**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:

Lauren knows her mother would be proud.

“One night, we were talking in bed and my mom said, ‘If I die, I would want something in memory of me, even it was something little,’” Lauren said. “This scholarship is something big.”
Just like Tracy.

For example:

Daria admits she'd like to hit a home run on Friday, but that isn't her main goal.

“My goal is to play my best,” she said. “If the home run happens, it happens. But it's more important that I am focused and I give 100 percent.”

Yes, you can ...

- Use the first name on the second reference if the story is about a student.
- Have a lead longer than one paragraph
- Put quotes within your lead

No, you shouldn't ...

- Use a news lead
- Write in the passive voice
- Use too many adverbs and adjectives instead of specific nouns and powerful verbs
- Have messy handwriting
- Stack quotes
- Avoid using 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.



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