

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.

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 - describes a scene/person

Deion Sanders Jr. knows what they say in the hallways.

They say he'll be a terrible quarterback. That he's too short. That he can't see squat pat the six-foot-something offensive linemen. That he's cocky. That he'll never amount to anything.

They say he'll never be his dad.

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.

Another good one ...

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.”

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.

Which is the best lead?

- 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.

Which is the best lead?

- 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.

Which is the best lead?

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 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 be shot in 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 be a female head football coach in Texas.

Nina Colt doesn't have to. She was just named head football coach.

Try this instead...

Varsity football Coach Seamus Shift loves to joke with his players, so earlier this month when he told the varsity football team a woman would be replacing him as head coach, the players laughed.

“But when he didn’t laugh, we knew it was true,” varsity quarterback junior Emmanuel Dyson said.

And it is true.

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.

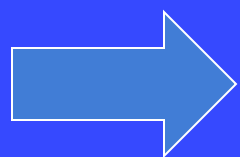
It's the thesis sentence of your story.

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Former women’s professional football player and current varsity football coach at St. Mary’s Preparatory Academy in Florida, Nina Colt will replace Shift as varsity football coach for the 2011-2012 school year. She will shadow Shift next week to meet the players and assistant coaches.

“I want my players to be more than jocks,” she said. “I want them to be outstanding young men in society. Of course, I want to win games, but winning will never come before individual success in the classroom and in the community.”



**The Nut
Graph**

What's next?



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

**Use the Transition/Quote
formula**

transition

Shift, Principal Ed Day, a teacher and two parents were on the committee that hired Colt. Shift said she was everyone's number one candidate.

direct quote

“When I leave in May, this program will be in great hands,” Shift said. “Coach Colt will bring new energy to our football program. I have no doubt that she was the right person to hire.”

transition

When she applied, Colt said she didn't think she had much of a chance.

direct quote

“After the panel interview, I felt pretty confident, but I didn't want to be cocky,” she said. “Hiring a female varsity football coach in Texas is a big step for a school district.”

transition

Day said he didn't hesitate about hiring a woman as the varsity football coach. Colt's hire marks the third female varsity football coach at a Texas public school.

direct quote

“She was the best candidate by far, and I know she will take our team forward,” Day said. “All of the other candidates were selling themselves. Coach Colt was the only one who talked about students and what she'd do for them.”

ED DAY, principal

“I didn’t think twice about hiring a woman as the varsity football coach. We are not living in the 1950s. She was the best candidate by far, and I know she will take our team forward. All of the other candidates were selling themselves. Coach Colt was the only one who talked about students and what she’d do for them. I expect we will hear a negative comment or two in the beginning, but I don’t expect comments to affect Coach Colt.”

**Where did
those
transitions
come from?**

Day said he didn’t hesitate about hiring a woman as the varsity football coach. Colt’s hire marks the third female varsity football coach at a Texas public school.

“She was the best candidate by far, and I know she will take our team forward,” Day said. “All of the other candidates were selling themselves. Coach Colt was the only one who talked about students and what she’d do for them.”

NINA COLT, 2011-2012 head varsity football coach
“Frankly, I didn’t think I had much of a shot at a coaching position at a Texas public school, but I’ve never shied away from a challenge. After the panel interview, I felt pretty confident, but I didn’t want to be cocky. Hiring a female varsity football coach in Texas is a big step for a school district. I look forward to the challenge and the opportunity. I have the highest respect for Coach Shift and his program.

**Where did
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When she applied, Colt said she didn’t think she had much of a chance.

“After the panel interview, I felt pretty confident, but I didn’t want to be cocky,” she said. “Hiring a female varsity football coach in Texas is a big step for a school district.”

**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!