



# 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 paragraph(s) 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 most important sentence in any article is the first one. If it doesn’t induce the reader to proceed to the second sentence, your article is dead.” — William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*

# 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**

On New Year's Eve, Charles Curzio stayed later than planned at his small TV repair shop to make sure his customers would have their sets in time to watch the King Orange Jamboree Parade.

His kindness cost his life.

# **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**

The man she loved slapped her face. Furious, she told him never, ever to do that again.

"What are you going to do, kill me?" he asked, and handed her a gun.

"Here, kill me," he challenged.

She did.

# **Descriptive – of a scene/person**

It's 2 a.m. and junior Carter Wade stumbles through his front door. He's hours past his curfew, and 20 milligrams of Xanax past what his body can sustain.

Wade doesn't remember being driven to a rehab center in a cop car. He wasn't aware his body was being loaded into an ambulance after he became unconscious in the backseat. He couldn't process that his heart was about to stop.

# **Descriptive - of a scene/person**

Melissa Ferrell re-read the report, trying to control her anger.

Her son Sam had Down syndrome. He did not always speak in complete sentences. He could not hold a pencil. He had trouble going to the bathroom.

And yet the Austin Independent School District was claiming that he did not qualify for special education services.

"Specialized instruction is not needed," the evaluation report said.

# **Descriptive – of a scene/person**

In quiet moments, Zachary Sutterfield rewinds the story of his life and looks at photographs from simpler times.

There's one from graduation night at San Angelo's Central High School, class of 2016. The student with a winning speech and debate record is smiling widely, wearing his blue gown, a plaid bow tie and an orange sash stitched with the school logo and bobcat mascot.

“I used to have long blond hair,” he says. “I used to wear very nerdy glasses, and I would consider myself a decent looking kid.”

# Descriptive – of a scene/person

When Angel Elektra entered the library, the clamor of children faded. Dozens of little faces swiveled around to watch the 6-foot-tall drag queen clad in teal and black lace glide through the space. Everyone could see Elektra's thrilled expression from across the room: After all, it was painted on her face.

As she sauntered toward her perch, she waved to the attentive crowd. She then took a seat on a chair made for someone perhaps half her height and began to read from "The Drag Queen Story Hour" coloring book.

"What is a drag queen?" Elektra asked, reading from page two.

"A performer!" yelled a boy from the audience.

"A dragon?" asked another.

"No, not a dragon," Elektra replied.

"Between a dragon and a person," another kid shouted.

Elektra paused. "That works," she deadpanned.

# **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

The end of a simple phrase changed the 13-year-old boy forever.

“Yes, it does last the rest of your life,” the doctor said.

On the day of his diagnosis, James Mapes was in the waiting room, grasping his mother’s hand tight, hoping and praying the blood test results would be in his favor.

The physician then broke the news that James had been fearing. He would be stuck with his condition for life. Immediately, questions rushed through his head.

“Why did this happen? What will people think? What will people say?”

# Startling Statement

His last meal was worth \$30,000, and it killed him.

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Junior Josh Duckworth has a fetish.

# **Fun lead**

When they heard the screams, no one suspected the rooster.



Dechardonae Gaines, 2, was toddling down the sidewalk Monday lugging her Easy Bake Oven when she became the victim in one of the weirder animal attack cases police can recall.

In the cluster of beige houses at Lime Street and Safford Avenue where Dechardonae lives, man and chicken have coexisted peacefully for years in quiet defiance of city ordinance.

That ended Monday afternoon, when authorities apprehended the offending rooster, named Rockadoodle Two, and its sister, named Hen.

# 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 ...**

Chris Buckley walks out to his porch and looks up and down the empty street.

“I admit it, I’m nervous,” he says, lighting a cigarette with heavily tattooed hands.

His densely colored arms — and much of his body — are a paisley record of his many hates. KKK symbols dot his left knuckles, another surrounds his navel; an anti-government militia tag covers his neck. Most prominent is the big word in Arabic emblazoned on the back of his forearm: “Infidel.”

“I wanted them to know I was the one the imam warned them about,” he says.

# **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 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...

- When senior Patrick Manubay was 10 years old, his mother was diagnosed with Stage 4 pancreatic cancer. She died four months later.
- Patrick didn't talk about his mother's death and was a quiet and withdrawn child. When Patrick was a sophomore, his aunt gave him a letter from his mother. In the letter, she wrote how she knew he would change the world for the better one day.
- Motivated by the letter, Patrick designed a website for a fundraiser project — Five for Life asking people to donate \$5 for the Pancreatic Cancer Research Fund.
- To promote the fundraiser, Patrick made a video — using old videos of his mother and interviewing his sisters and dad. The video went viral with more than 1 million views. So far, Patrick has raised \$500,000.

# WHAT WENT WRONG?

Death is a tragic event — especially when you lose someone close to you. Patrick Manubay understands this better than most. He lost his mother to cancer several years ago.

# WHAT WENT WRONG?

Everyone can imagine what it would be like to lose a parent to cancer. You would be lost, sad and withdrawn. You would probably be jealous of your friends who have both parents. You might cry yourself to sleep every night. You might shut down completely.

That is what Patrick Manubay did until he got a letter from his mother that she wrote before she died.

# WHAT WENT RIGHT?

After his mother's death from pancreatic cancer, senior Patrick Manubay was lost.

"I was sad," he said. "I was angry. I was jealous of my peers who had moms."

So he lived his life withdrawn, speaking only when he had to. Then, when he was 15, his aunt gave him a letter from his mother, and "everything changed."

"Her words woke me up," he said. "I knew I was wasting my life, and that she would have been disappointed in me."

Disappointing his mother was the last thing Patrick ever wanted to do, so after talking with his father, he jumped into action. Patrick created a website and started a fundraiser project — Five for Life — with a goal that 5,000 people donate \$5 each to the Pancreatic Cancer Research Fund (PCRF).

# Lead writing pitfalls:

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



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

Patrick Manubay raised \$500,000 for the  
Pancreatic Cancer Research Fund.

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We are proud of Patrick Manubay for raising  
\$500,000 for the Pancreatic Cancer Research  
Fund. Way to go, Patrick!

# 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.

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

# Description must be relevant and add to ...

The house on 53rd Street and Huntington Avenue stood motionless.

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Before the sun even rises, 17-year-old senior Raymond Buster pushes back the red and blue comforter on his twin bed and drags himself to his small, yellow shower. He quickly washes his light brown hair and puts on his shorts, black running shirt and neon green running shoes.

As he walks out the door to head to his cross country practice, he grabs a strawberry Pop Tart and waves good-bye to his mother who is still in her fluffy, pink robe.

# Relevant description

5 a.m. The alarm blares and senior Raymond Buster drags himself out of bed after only a five-hour slumber.

The mornings come early for this 17-year-old cross country competitor, but he says it's worth it.

“I want to get to the State Meet this year,” he said. “And that means, I run early and I run often.”

# 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.

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Imagine what it would be like to catch a catfish with your bare hands. Senior Callie Upshaw doesn't have to. She does it most weekends.

# Try this instead...

Senior Callie Upshaws' weekends are anything but typical.

After cheering at a football or basketball game on Friday nights, Callie often spends her Saturdays shoving a bare hand into a catfish hole and wrestling out a 30-pound catfish for her friends to tie up.

"It's a total rush to catch a catfish with your bare hands," she said. "Until you do it, you won't understand it."

That is how Callie sold the idea of "noodling" to her friends. The results were the same.

"Callie is right when she says noodling is a rush," senior Sierra Villalobos said. "It's like nothing I've ever done."

# 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 Callie Upshaws' weekends are anything but typical.

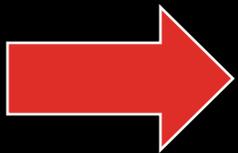
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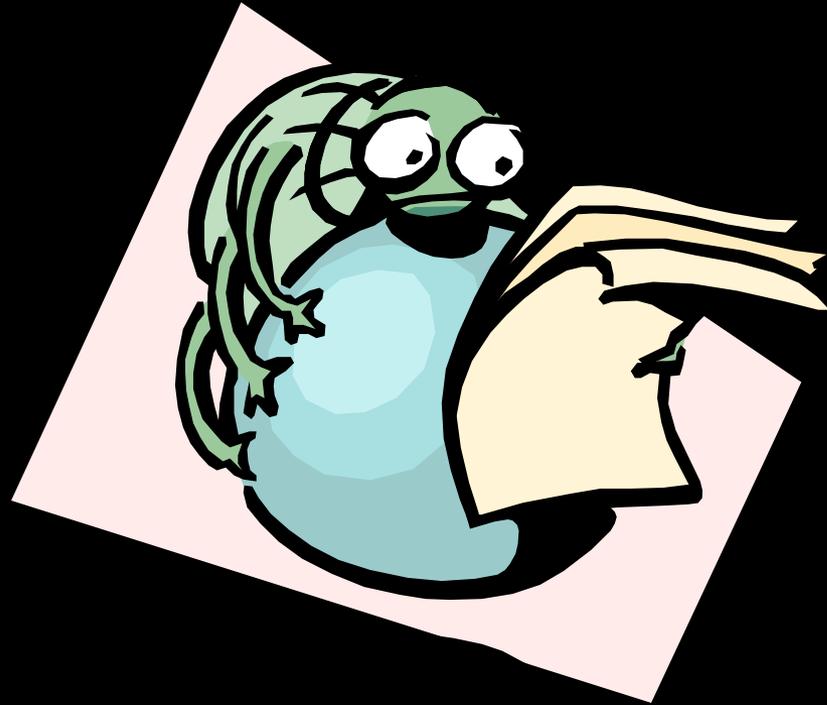
"Callie is right when she says noodling is a rush," senior Sierra Villalobos said. "It's like nothing I've ever done."

That "rush" spread to a few more friends and now, with Callie at the helm, the friends comprised an all-female group called the "Fat Cat Ladies," which noodles on local rivers most weekends.



## The Nut Graph

# What's next?





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

**Use the Transition/Quote  
formula.**

**transition**

The girls have become so proficient in their new sport that Callie and senior Brooke Frio hope to compete in the East Texas Noodlin' Competition this spring.

**direct quote**

“We don't expect many girls at the tournament, but that won't stop us,” Callie said. “We are ready to bring home some trophies.”

**transition**

Callie and her father, who checks rivers ahead of time for the girls, trained each girl, but even with that training, the thought of noodling was intimidating.

**direct quote**

“The first time I went noodling, I wasn't sure I could do it,” Villalobos said. “I weigh 98 pounds, and Callie caught a 30-pounder right in front of me. I didn't know if I had the strength or bravery to do it.”

## **Callie Upshaw, senior**

“This isn’t an easy sport. I usually come home with cuts all over my hands and bruises on my legs and arms, but it’s totally worth it. People think we are crazy, but that’s because they’ve never tried it.

“I hope everyone comes to the fish fry. We are excited about going to the East Texas tournament. We need to raise about \$1000, to get the whole group there and pay our entry fees.”

**Where did  
those  
transitions  
come from?**

Callie admits that noodling is not easy.

“I usually come home with cuts all over my hands, and bruises on my legs and arms, but it’s totally worth it,” Upshaw said. “People think we are crazy, but that’s because they’ve never tried it.”

# 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.

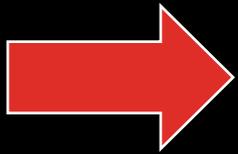
Tracy Gillies lived her life for her two girls – Lauren and four-year-old Payton. She made it fun, colorful and most of all inspiring. Each year for the girls' birthday parties, Tracy crafted creative themes and executed elaborate plans to make for an "over the top birthday party." Lauren's favorite 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.

# 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.



**Jeanne Acton**  
**[jacton@uiltexas.org](mailto:jacton@uiltexas.org)**