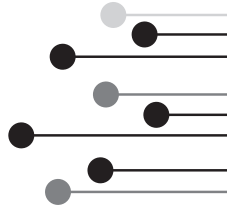


Concepts for Practicing Feature Storytelling



Diving In: Becoming a Feature Writer

Feature storytelling is not exclusive to specialized beat teams or elite magazine contributors; it is a type of journalism used by every reporter to help readers gain a fuller understanding of issues and truly immerse themselves in the experiences of others. A reporter on the crime beat might spend time riding along with police officers on duty and produce a narrative about the experience. A government reporter could research the history of a famed landmark, explaining its background, significance and the various contributions taxpayers make to maintain it. A courts reporter could publish a series of profiles on convicts who have earned degrees or learned trades while in prison.

A feature reporter needs to demonstrate the qualities characteristic of every journalist: tenacity, curiosity, keen eyes and open ears. Beyond that, reporting features requires a thirst for knowledge, pressing you forward toward truth and deeper understanding. You have to be versatile and open-minded, ready to change directions at a moment's notice to go wherever the story takes you.

Feature storytelling allows you to tell a wide range of stories in ways that are fun and rewarding for you and engaging for your audience. Breaking news brings a rush of adrenaline and excitement, but feature stories help reporters to really shine, demonstrating their storytelling skills and adding value that will serve your readers as they dive deeper into the news.

There are so many story types to choose from, it is hard to get bored writing features. Good feature writers let the story and sources dictate the style rather than trying to fit the news into a premade box that may be efficient but less fulfilling. Feature journalism is both challenging and rewarding, and the techniques discussed here will help you find new ways to approach and write articles that will engage your audience.

Telling Stories With Value

When journalists assess an event, they use **news values**—attributes that determine whether they should pursue a story, how much time and length to devote to it and where it should be placed in the news product. To make these decisions, reporters and editors ask questions about the occurrence, guided by the following news values (see Figure 2.1).

Impact. How much does the story matter to our readers? How many people might be affected by it?

Timeliness. Did it happen recently? Is there a particular day/month when this story might be most relevant to our readers?

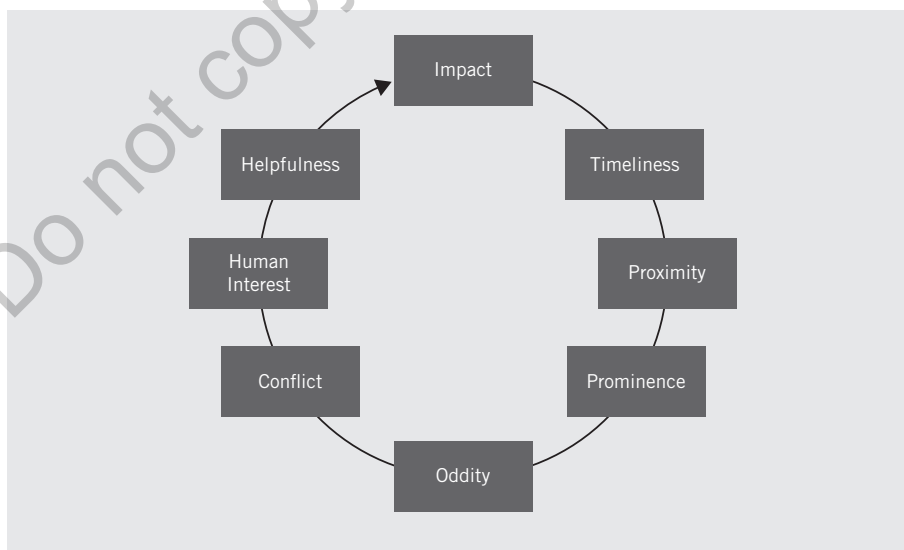
Proximity. Did the news event occur within our proclaimed coverage area? Is this a larger issue that can be localized to our readers?

Prominence. Does the story involve people or organizations most readers would know or those who make decisions affecting our readers?

Oddity/Novelty. Is this an unusual occurrence that would pique our readers' interest? Is it something that has never happened before or has happened only rarely in the past?

Conflict. Does the story involve two or more people/parties disagreeing? Will our readers want to weigh in on this issue with their opinions?

Figure 2.1 News Values



Words With Pros

“Casting” for Feature Stories

Interview with Lane DeGregory, Pulitzer Prize–winning enterprise reporter, Tampa Bay Times

Enterprise reporting has taken Lane DeGregory places most people never go.

During her 30-plus years in journalism, she attended a strip show starring President Donald Trump’s alleged mistress, porn star Stormy Daniels (real name: Stephanie Gregory Clifford). She sat through drug court with a recovering addict. She hung out with carnival workers at the Florida State Fair.

And, most memorably, DeGregory spent six months with the adoptive family of a “feral child” whom police discovered living in utter filth, unable to speak or communicate in any way. This is the journey that led her to write the three-part story “Girl in the Window,” for which she won a Pulitzer Prize in 2009.

In “casting” around for ideas, DeGregory has created her own system for determining whether the subject is worthy of a deep-dive feature story. Using the acronym CAST, she explains what ingredients make up a captivating feature:

Characters. “I want a really strong character. Even if it’s not a person—a place, a town, a building—I want a character, not an idea.”

Action. “I want action. Whether I can follow the action or am able to re-create the action, something has to happen.”

Setting. “Feature stories should have a strong sense of place so they can make the readers feel like they are there.”

Theme. “There has to be some piece of the human condition that people can relate to. Whether it’s fear, rage, hope or even if they can’t imagine themselves in the situation. That’s what I look for when starting to write a story—what’s the one word we can pick out to establish what the theme is?”

Writers should always look for new approaches to storytelling, but DeGregory says their own style, or “voice,” will emerge naturally. Her method for each



| Cherie Diez, Tampa Bay Times

story is to try to find the subject’s voice rather than her own. She wonders, “What is it like to be that person?”

Although it is hard for her to describe her own voice, she says readers can usually tell when a story is hers without reading the byline.

“I think it’s different for each writer. It’s different for each story. It’s like, when you’re listening to ‘I Want to Hold Your Hand’ and ‘I Am the Walrus,’ the songs are completely different, but you still know it’s the Beatles.”

DeGregory says the key to telling impactful feature stories is to put yourself out there. Feature storytellers need to find something they are interested in to write about. If they’re not interested, they need to find someone who is passionate about the subject to help immerse them in the story.

“You have to be willing to go along for the ride. You can’t report a feature story on your phone. You can’t report a feature story by email. It has to be in person.

“With news, it’s easy to put a shield up, but with features you have to make that human connection. That means sharing a bit of yourself.”

DeGregory hosts a podcast on journalism for the Tampa Bay Times, called WriteLane. She also offers teaching tools for aspiring journalists on her website, www.lanede Gregory.org.

Human Interest. Does the story involve average people doing extraordinary things? Are there elements of tragedy, inspiration or triumph to which our readers can relate?

Helpfulness. Does this story help our readers make decisions about their lives or learn new information that might be useful to them?

News stories may contain any or all of these values. All stories should include impact. If the audience would neither be affected nor interested by the article, it probably won't make the publication. Many articles also contain timeliness and proximity if they are published in a newspaper or magazine with regular deadlines and a specific geographic location. The other values—prominence, oddity/novelty, conflict, human interest and helpfulness—vary from story to story.

Distinguishing Features

Spot news typically involves elements of immediacy and is written using the **inverted pyramid** method, in which a news story is organized by putting the most important information at the top and working through to end with the least important information. In these stories, prominence and timeliness are prized values, as they often involve breaking news from official sources that may or may not affect readers directly. A typical hard news story might involve a car crash on the highway that is backing up traffic. It is immediate; it will likely involve police sources, who are prominent decision-makers in the community; and it will affect some people directly (those stuck in traffic or the family of those involved) and others not at all. Sometimes the fact that someone is well-known makes all the difference. Although it is rarely newsworthy when an average citizen purchases a pet, national news outlets consider it breaking news whenever a U.S. president does so. In fact, journalists are so used to covering this type of news that CNN and several other news organizations published stories in 2017 citing President Donald Trump's departure from the norm when he did *not* bring a pet into the Oval Office during the first six months of his term.¹

There are two types of feature stories. **Soft news** stories are aimed at entertaining or informing readers, typically without any urgency. Coverage of a community concert or a new-business profile on a local ice cream shop would belong in this category. Be careful when reporting soft news to avoid producing **puff pieces**—stories that simply offer praise or exaggerate the greatness of a person, group or organization and avoid any analysis or examination of their shortcomings.

There are also **news features**, which tend to be longer, in-depth stories detailing the background and impact of an issue and the people affected by it. News features go beyond the basic who, what, when and where questions prioritized in spot news coverage and focus more on why and how.

Good feature stories do not just report *what* happened—they take deeper dives into the reasons news events occur and what they might mean in a larger sense. They often emphasize different news values: proximity, human interest, helpfulness and novelty/oddity. Feature stories frequently reflect proximity, with reporters

covering news events that affect people within their coverage area. For example, a feature story might focus on a local fundraiser benefiting a group or person in the community. Instead of simply reporting on the basic facts—where it will be held, who is involved, when it is taking place—a good feature story will explore why the fundraiser is necessary, how it got started and its significance to the community. In this way, feature stories often involve elements of human interest. Feature writers need to try to get their readers beyond the basic facts, which are organized easily at the top of spot news stories.



| Pixabay/@janeb13

A feature story should help readers relate personally to the sources and issues involved, reflecting the human interest news value. At *The (Toronto) Star*, social justice reporter Laurie Monsebraaten focuses her stories about policy and data around humans.² For instance, she told the story of a 22-year-old man with disabilities whose single mother was no longer eligible for child support payments from the man's father:

Joshua Coates is a polite and friendly 21-year-old who reads and writes at the Grade 2 level. He has trouble paying attention, suffers from anxiety and obsessive compulsive behaviour and “will require the care and supervision of others throughout his life,” according to his doctor.

Joshua was born with Di George Syndrome, a genetic abnormality that causes multiple medical and psychiatric problems that his doctor says are “chronic, severe and debilitating.”

He is also at the heart of a constitutional challenge launched by his mother in a bid to have his biological father continue to support him.

—LAURIE MONSEBRAATEN, *The (Toronto) Star*³

Monsebraaten's use of the family in her story resonated with readers, and her work prompted supporters to introduce an amendment changing the law to allow adult children with disabilities to receive support.

Many feature articles can also be considered **enterprise stories**. Enterprise stories are those not based on a press release or scheduled event; they involve more in-depth issues reporters find or conceptualize on their own. These stories sometimes include the helpfulness and oddity/novelty news values. For example, a profile on the first female CEO at a company would reflect the novelty news value, as her appointment is a first for the organization. Helpfulness stories can also add value to content already being circulated online by helping readers think about news events in a broader way. For instance, a breaking news story about a deadly flu outbreak could lead to a how-to story detailing local doctors' suggestions for staying healthy.

Feature stories without a specific time peg are called **evergreens** because they flourish all year round—meaning they can run anytime. Evergreens are beneficial for news organizations in that they can make a story timeless, which is particularly

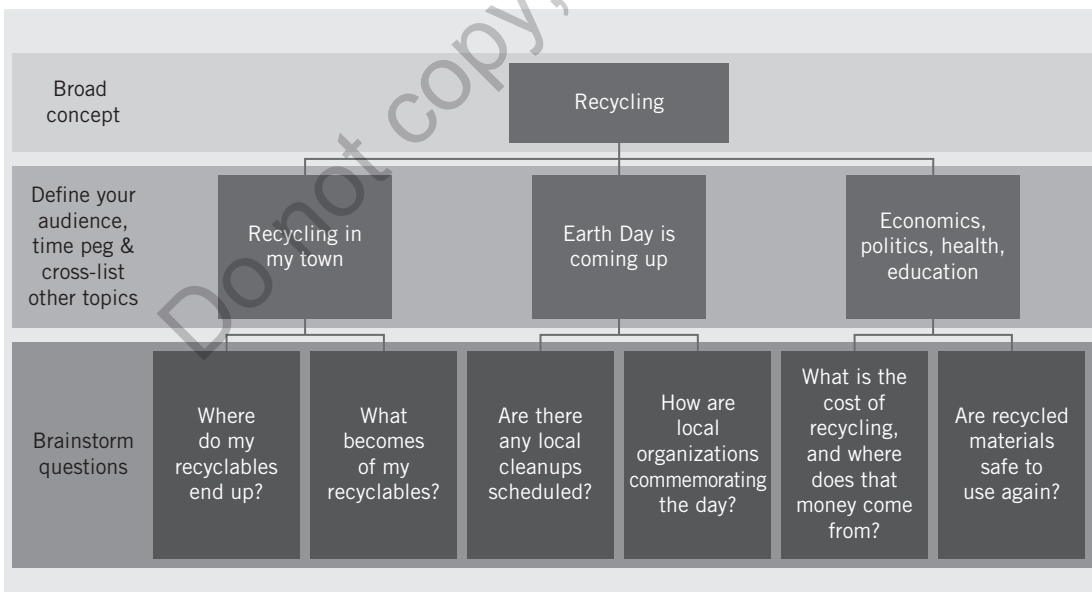
important in the Digital Age because stories can resurface repeatedly over time and gain new audiences on social media. For example, a feature about a new baseball pitcher with a great curve ball will be relevant only as long as that pitcher is new and interesting. But an evergreen story about how to throw a curve ball could circulate indefinitely, gaining new audiences over the years and enjoying a prolonged life online.

Popular feature stories include topics that people care about and interact with regularly, including relationships, pets, health and wellness, sports, the environment and technology. According to Google, the top 10 trending news stories of 2017 included April the giraffe giving birth at Upstate New York’s Animal Adventure Park, the popularity of the virtual currency Bitcoin and the first solar eclipse to cross the entire country in 99 years. These stories are timely in the moment, but they also resonate with readers long after the initial news event is over.

What Is Your Story?

One of the most difficult parts of being a feature reporter is coming up with story ideas. It is best to begin with a broad concept and then narrow it down to come up with manageable story ideas using a process called **mapping**. Think of a topic that interests you. Then, consider your audience, any related time pegs and what other broad subjects could be involved with your topic. Based on those elements, map out story ideas to come up with questions you could actually investigate for a story (see Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2 Mapping Your Story Idea



Helpful Hints

Generating Story Ideas With News Values

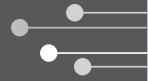
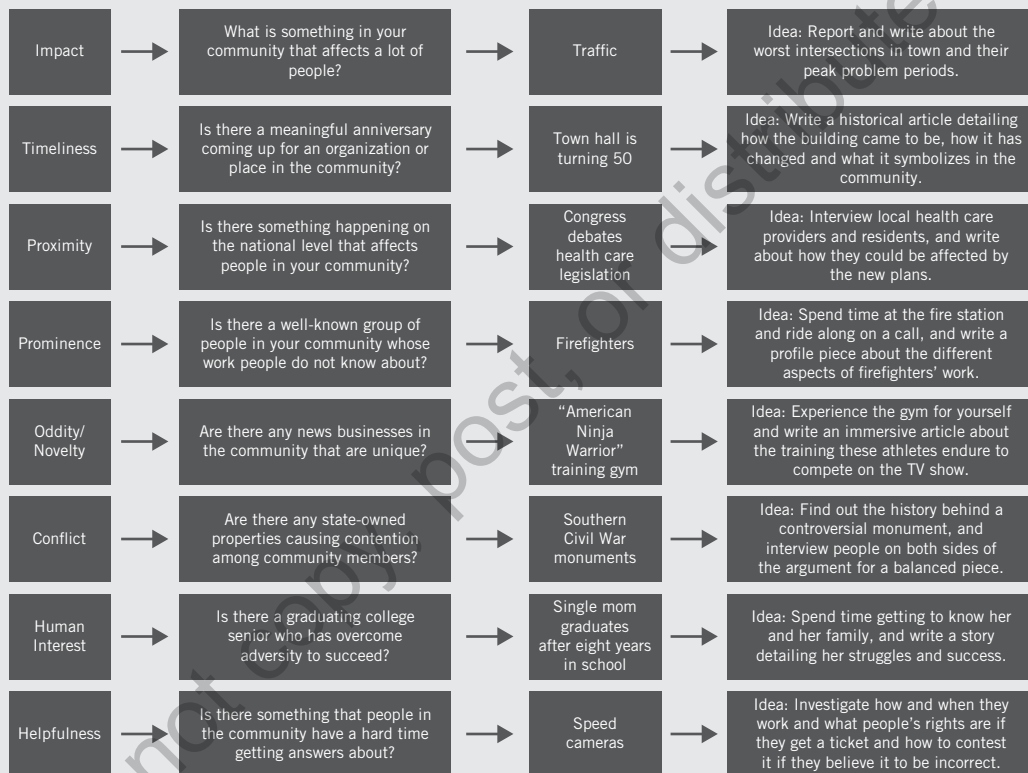


Figure 2.3 Story Ideas From News Values



News values are not used just to determine whether an event is newsworthy; they can also be helpful tools for coming up with enterprise story ideas. Instead of searching through press releases

and event calendars for stories, you can generate your own ideas by thinking broadly about each news value and narrowing big-picture thoughts into concrete story pitches (see Figure 2.3).

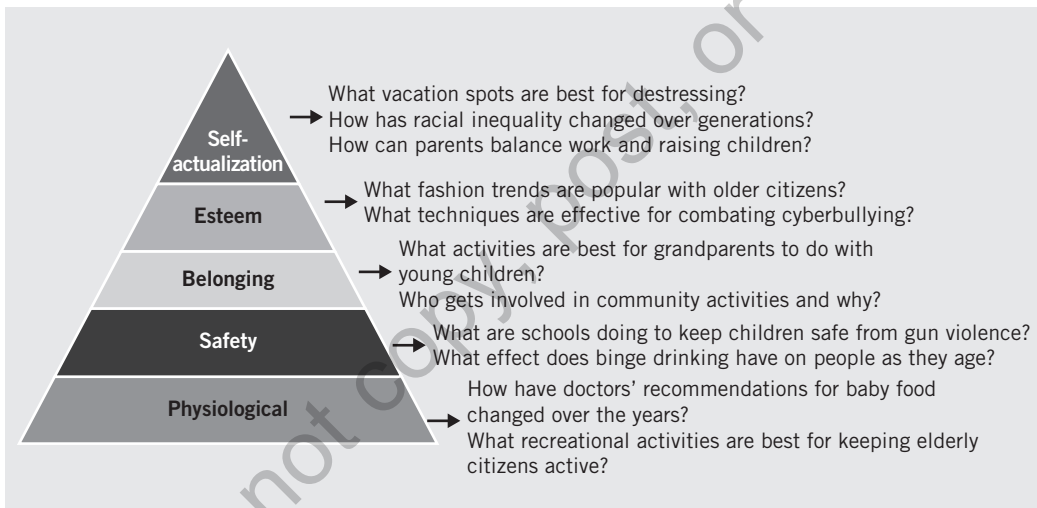
Creating Audience-Centric Stories

In coming up with good feature story ideas, reporters need to think about what affects people's daily lives. Using our knowledge of news values, we can brainstorm enterprise story ideas that are relevant to our readers, as displayed in the "Helpful Hints" box.

Reporters can also tap into their knowledge of human psychology to think about what types of stories might impact readers. Using psychologist Abraham Maslow's popular hierarchy of needs theory,⁴ journalists can come up with story ideas for each level of needs and thus for different stages in peoples' lives, as displayed in this graphic (see Figure 2.4).

Using Stories to Meet Needs

Figure 2.4 Maslow's hierarchy of needs can be used to generate story ideas.



Taking Notice

Start by identifying questions. You can use these techniques to brainstorm questions about relevant issues in your area.

- **Notice things, and ask why:** How do clothing stores select their music? What is the store hoping to accomplish with its selections?

- **Changes and trends:** Gas prices are going up—what are the potential consequences? Will people take more “stay-cations” (vacations at home)? Will families and friends get together less frequently?
- **Investigate:** Underage drinking has gone down in your town—why? What factors are contributing to this?
- **Look for ordinary people doing extraordinary things:**
 - **NO:** The mayor calls for improvements to low-income housing.
 - **YES:** A small group of college students create a new Habitat for Humanity chapter and participate in local builds.
- Look for the unusual occurrences:
 - **NO:** A profile about a local pediatrician.
 - **YES:** A profile about a local pediatrician who incorporates yoga and holistic healing in patient practice alongside medical treatments.
- **Think about life skills people might want:** How do you change your own oil? What can you do to better train your pet?

Thinking about stories from the readers’ perspective can help you craft feature stories that are impactful, memorable and shareable.

Exploring Feature Story Types

Feature writing allows reporters to explore a wide range of story types. Featured magazine articles can range in length from about 1,000 words up to 3,000 or more for in-depth publications, such as *The New Yorker*. Newspaper and online feature profiles are still longer than many other types of news stories but tend to be shorter than magazine articles, ranging from about 500 to 1,500 words.

Here we’ll explore some of the most common types of feature storytelling.

Reaction Features

Breaking news stories often revolve around the immediate basics, but feature reporting can include reaction pieces that carry a story beyond the preliminary information to help deepen readers’ knowledge of the topic. Usually, these stories involve a blend of expert sources and community officials who can provide big-picture perspectives on the issue and people who can talk about how they were personally affected.

Reaction pieces can help readers better understand the effects of a community tragedy. After a devastating fire in Northern California ravaged more than 1,000 homes in 2018, *Los Angeles Times* reporter Joseph Serna spoke with a man who had lost his wife and two great-grandchildren. Serna used the man’s story as one

example of how the community reacted to the destructive fires. This excerpt illustrates how his story is one of many:

Ed Bledsoe cradled the stone in his calloused right palm, using his thumb to scrape away a layer of dust and ash. Finding nothing but a gray, smooth surface, he hunched over and tossed it back into the dirt.

The Carr [Powerhouse Road] fire had destroyed his home and killed his wife and two great-grandchildren. Bledsoe was looking for something to hang on to, even if it was just the rainbow-painted rock 4-year-old Emily had decorated.

“The paint would’ve survived” the searing heat, he said.

The fire took pretty much everything else. His wife, Melody. The great-grandchildren they were raising: James, 5, and Emily. A firefighter who had tried to warn residents of the coming danger. Another resident who could not get out in time. More than a thousand homes across Shasta County.

—JOSEPH SERNA, *Los Angeles Times*⁵

Understanding issues on a larger scale can be difficult or uninteresting for readers. **Localizers** are reaction pieces detailing how issues affecting the larger city, state, nation or world are impacting the local community. These can help readers process how broader national decisions and world events affect their daily lives. Think about ways you can go deeper following a national or state legislative decision. For example, suppose your state passes a new law banning plastic bags at local stores. How can you capture reactions from your community?

- **Who would you talk to?** Local shoppers, grocery store managers, retail store managers and environmentalists.
- **What records can you get?** How many plastic bags are used each year in your town? What effects have they had on the local environment and wildlife? How much money will this save local retailers and cost customers?
- **What do you want to know?** Are people feeling pleased or inconvenienced by the new law? How do store managers think the law will affect their businesses? What are environmentalists hoping to achieve, and what do they think will happen next?

Human Interest Features

Human interest stories attempt to relate life experiences to readers. Stories like these can focus on ordinary people doing extraordinary things, often involving elements of tragedy and/or inspiration. They may also examine the personal

lives of well-known people, such as celebrities, politicians, athletes and prominent business leaders. These stories are often written as **profiles**—articles focused on a particular person and some aspect of their life that is unique. Profiles resonate with readers because they explore human experiences that are often relatable to the audience.

Human interest features tell someone else's story and require a lot of time and attention. At magazines, reporters may spend weeks following sources, getting to know their routines and personality. Writing a human interest feature often pushes reporters to immerse themselves in the story and truly observe subjects in their everyday setting. Because the reporter is along for the ride, many profiles begin with an anecdote to help set the scene for readers. This opening anecdote from Charlotte Observer reporter Théoden Janes illustrates the primary source's emotions and thought processes, giving the reader insight into the source's mindset:

Carolyn Hart was a little hesitant to tell her father that she was planning to jump out of a perfectly good airplane 10,000 feet above western North Carolina.

So she waited until the night before to call him, then held her breath.

He reacted, of course, exactly the way she'd feared:

"Ohhhhhh, do you think it's too late for me to get to be able to join you?" Jack Hart asked.

Carolyn had rehearsed her response: "Yeah, sorry, Dad—they're booked up. I don't think they would let you jump anyway."

But the next morning, when the folks at Skydive Central North Carolina called to say the weather in Maiden looked a bit too cloudy for a good jump and apologized and asked to schedule a makeup date, Carolyn Hart knew. She wasn't going to be able to wiggle her way out of this one. And he wasn't going to drop it.

She knew her father—who turns 100 years old on Aug. 13—was going to do everything he could to make sure that when Carolyn finally *did* go up in that little prop plane, he'd be sardined into the seat next to her, ready to go skydiving for the first time in his life.

—THÉODEN JANES, *Charlotte Observer*⁶

When writing human interest stories, conducting good interviews is crucial. We will explore tactics for conducting in-depth feature interviews in Chapter 4.

Narrative Features

Narrative writing is as close to dramatic playwriting as journalism gets. Narratives dive deeply into a story, using characters, setting and plot to immerse the reader. Using the narrative writing technique requires thorough reporting and descriptive writing to uncover details that will help readers imagine they are on the scene. Careful observation of your sources and the scene are essential.

From the Field

Building Descriptive Narration

Adjectives should be used sparingly in journalistic writing, so it is important to choose the right ones. Selecting the right words to

describe a character depends on keen observational skills. Show, don't tell.

Figure 2.5 Telling

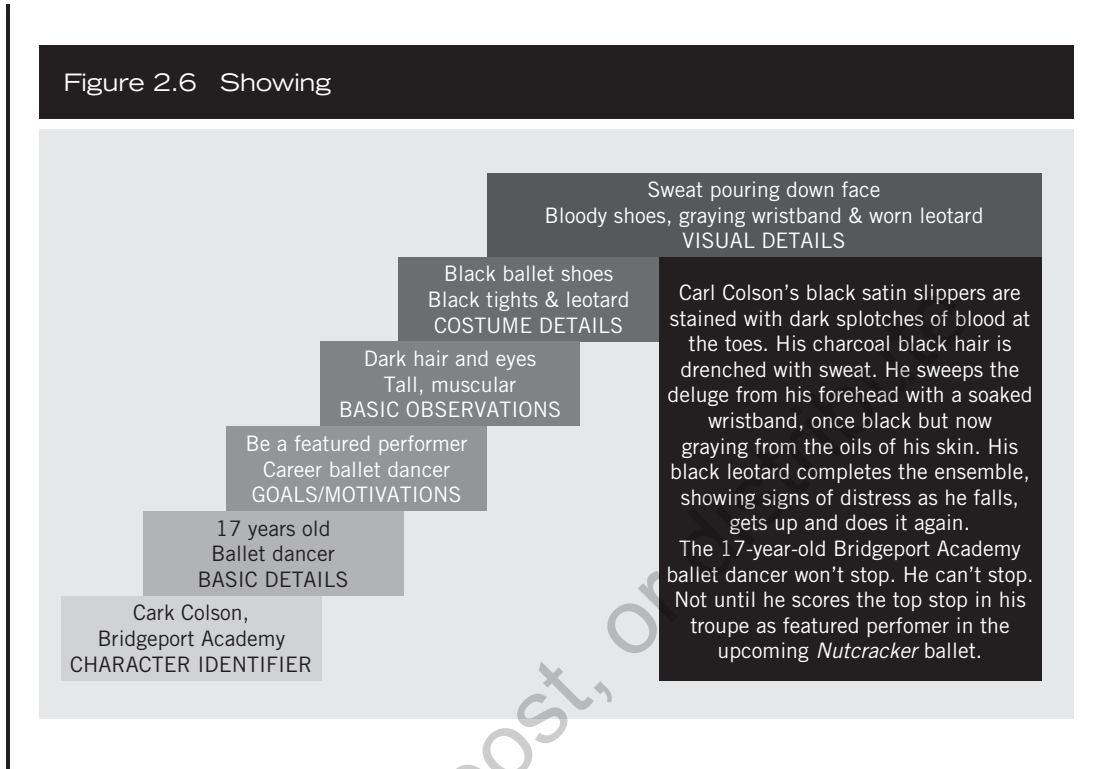
DESCRIPTORS	NARRATIVE
<i>GOALS AND MOTIVATIONS</i>	Bridgeport Academy dancer Carl Colson, 17, works hard to achieve his dream of becoming a featured performer in the upcoming "Nutcracker" ballet.
Be a featured performer Career ballet dancer	
<i>BASIC DETAILS</i>	
17 years old Ballet dancer	
<i>CHARACTER IDENTIFIER</i>	
Carl Colson Bridgeport Academy	

In telling rather than showing, you are making an opinionated statement: "Colson works hard." Instead of inserting your own assessment of the dancer's work ethic, show the reader with a narration based on observed details, as illustrated in Figure 2.5. Think

about the character as if you are building steps up to a landing. Starting with the most basic details, which are still essential to the story, imagine how you can add to a general description to create an illustration for your audience, like Figure 2.6.

(Continued)

Figure 2.6 Showing



Narrative writing shares some similarities with human interest profiles in that careful character development is key. Unlike profiles, which are primarily focused on the story of a particular person or group, narratives use sources to illustrate a larger issue at play. They often rely heavily on dialogue and flashbacks from main characters to help explain how an issue came to be. Washington Monthly magazine reporter Mariah Blake used narration to talk about problems with America's health care system.⁷ She used a primary character—medical device maker Thomas Shaw—to illustrate the larger problems facing the industry. Blake sets the scene in this excerpt, showing us Shaw's frustration by using vivid imagery and dialogue:

When Thomas Shaw gets worked up, he twists in his chair and kneads his hand. Or he paces about in his tube socks grumbling, "They're trying to destroy us," and "The whole thing is a giant scam." And Shaw, the founder of a medical device maker called Retractable Technologies, spends a lot of time being agitated.

Blake also uses physical descriptions of the character, as well as his own recollections of his beginning, to get the reader more invested in the story and visualizing the scene:

Thomas Shaw is a lanky fifty-nine-year-old man with dark eyes and a shock of gray hair that gives him a bit of a mad scientist air. Growing up, he lived in Mexico and Arizona, where his father worked as a chemist (among other things, the elder Shaw invented the first nitrogen test for plants). Shaw describes his childhood home as a kind of frenetic laboratory where science and math problems were worked out on a chalkboard that hung over the dinner table.

Relatable similes and anecdotes can also help readers to visualize the scene and better understand complicated issues like those in Blake's article:

... Shaw finally came up with a crude prototype and found a local physician to test it on him—an event Shaw's wife documented with a shaky handheld camcorder. In the video, the doctor holds up a saline-filled syringe about the size of a kielbasa sausage. Then he jabs the needle into Shaw's arm and pauses for a second before pushing in the plunger. First the saline empties, and then the needle snaps back into the barrel with a pop.

Shaw had just invented the first retractable syringe, a fact that drew the attention of public health officials.

Throughout the story, the author hearkens back to the central point—Shaw is just one example of many people experiencing challenges as they try to bring change to the health care industry. Blake shows readers the “bigger picture” in this excerpt:

Stories like these abound among small suppliers, a number of whom have filed suit against GPOs [group purchasing organizations]. But most are wary of speaking out.

Narrative features are meant to take a reader through a story from beginning to end, much like a play or a novel. These types of in-depth stories can engross readers, helping them relate to the characters and imagine themselves in the scene. This makes them good candidates for social-media sharing.

Historical/Time Peg Features

Washington Post Executive Editor Philip L. Graham once called news “the first rough draft of history.” Journalists are responsible for documenting news events, preserving them for generations who will use lessons learned to make decisions about the future. But the value of news is not just its documentation; journalists' ability to

add context and meaning to those news events helps readers put the past, present and future in perspective.

Historical features can be used to help our readers learn about or reflect on important pieces of the community's past. When conflicts flared in 2017 surrounding monuments honoring Civil War Confederate fighters, many journalists wrote articles explaining the history of protested statues, plaques and memorials in their community to help readers more fully understand the issues.

Reporters Jane Stancill and Andrew Carter of *The News & Observer* in Raleigh, North Carolina, produced a detailed historical feature to help readers put the removal of Confederate monuments in perspective. Protestors pulled one such monument—a bronze statue of a Confederate soldier known as “Silent Sam”—from its platform near the entrance to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill campus in 2018. The event fueled shouts of excitement from people on one side of the argument and shouts of anger from those on the other. But most of all, the debate on what to do with the statue prompted confusion. Who was “Silent Sam”? Where had he come from? What had his significance been then, and what was it now? Stancill and Carter addressed these questions and more in their five-chapter article, which walks readers from the present to the past and then into the future, using a mix of archival documents and contemporary quotes to give readers a sense of how emotions have varied over the years and why conflicts over the statue rage on today.



The controversial statue “Silent Sam” stands guard on-campus at UNC- Chapel Hill before it was toppled by protesters in 2018.

Yellowspacehopper at English Wikipedia via Wikimedia

THE WHOLE STORY

The Unfinished Story of Silent Sam, From “Soldier Boy” to Fallen Symbol of a Painful Past

By Jane Stancill and Andrew Carter, *The News & Observer*⁸

PROLOGUE: After standing for 105 years in the oldest part of the UNC-Chapel Hill campus, Silent Sam fell on Monday, pulled from his pedestal by the protestors’ tug of a rope. Immediately the news became cause for celebration and outrage: celebration for those who saw the statue as a racist symbol of white supremacy, as an ode to soldiers who fought, among other things, for the survival of slavery; outrage for those who viewed the statue as a tribute to Southern heritage, and to lives lost while soldiers fought for a cause they believed in.

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To understand how Silent Sam fell is to understand how he rose. This is the story, told in five chapters, of the rise and fall of an 8-foot bronze, boyish depiction of a Confederate soldier who faced north, toward the enemy, for more than a century. It is a story whose final chapter has yet to be written.

Chapter 1: The Soldier Boy

On June 1, 1908, the Board of Trustees at UNC–Chapel Hill approved a request from the North Carolina division of the United Daughters of the Confederacy: The university supported a plan to build a Confederate monument.

The Civil War had been over for 43 years. In a time when the average life expectancy was around 50, the college students who'd left their campuses to fight in the war were becoming old men. In Chapel Hill, UNC President Francis Venable expressed a sudden urgency.

"I hope very much that this laudable purpose can be carried out," Venable wrote in a March 1909 letter to the chairwoman of the U.D.C.'s monument committee. "You know that more than one thousand of the alumni entered the Confederate service and surely something should be done to perpetuate the patriotism and heroism of these noble sons of the university."

And so began a five-year process to build the monument that became known as Silent Sam. In the beginning, the statue wasn't going to be a statue at all, but instead what Venable, UNC's president until 1913, described in a letter as a "memorial gateway to campus."

By September 1909, Venable had come to agree with the opinion of Annie Hill Kenan, the chairwoman of the U.D.C.'s monument committee. Kenan had favored a statue, and in a Sept. 24, 1909, letter, Venable wrote that her original idea "was the wisest one."

The university and the U.D.C. hoped to dedicate the statue at the 1911 commencement, on the 50th anniversary of the start of the war. Venable wrote of "a great reunion," one that would include Confederate veterans.

Instead, cost concerns and a back-and-forth among Venable, the U.D.C. and the potential designers of the monument delayed the proceedings. By early 1910, Venable and the U.D.C. favored a design from John Wilson, a Boston-based sculptor. He originally asked for \$10,000.

Venable feared the U.D.C. couldn't raise the money. Wilson wrote back in late March 1910, pleading for the work: "I should very much like to undertake the Soldier Boy at this time," he wrote, "as it appeals to me particularly." He and Venable agreed on a cost of \$7,500–\$5,000 of which UNC alumni raised, with the additional \$2,500 coming from the U.D.C.'s own fundraising.

Instead of using a traditional feature lede, Stancill and Carter opted for more of a narrative storytelling device, opening with a prologue detailing the current situation to help readers put the subsequent chapters into context as they go.

Chapter 1 takes the reader all the way back to the beginning of the story, answering the story's basic questions: Who is Silent Sam, how did he get there, and what was his purpose?

The author quickly answers one of the primary questions readers have: Where did this statue come from, and why was it built? Readers may skim a historical feature looking for a simple answer. They don't want to dig for it. Hopefully, they'll get engaged in the story while searching and decide to stay.

It took another three years for the statue to become reality, amid fundraising challenges and debates about its location. At last, the statue arrived in time for a dedication in early June 1913. The ceremony began at 3:30 p.m., according to a program. A band played Dixie.

The North Carolina governor, Locke Craig, addressed a crowd of dignitaries. Venable spoke, too. The last scheduled speaker was Julian Carr, who was a UNC student until he left to fight for the Confederacy. Carr espoused the virtue of the South, and those who fought for its cause, in laudatory, grandiose language.

"I dare to affirm this day, that if every state of the South had done what North Carolina did without a murmur, always faithful to its duty whatever the groans of the victims, there never would have been an Appomattox," Carr said, according to a copy of his speech.

Midway through it, Carr veered from praising the fight of Confederate soldiers to describing what they "meant to the welfare of the Anglo-Saxon race during the four years immediately succeeding the war, when the facts are that their courage and steadfastness saved the very life of the Anglo Saxon race in the South."

Moments later Carr recounted his return to Chapel Hill after the war ended:

"One hundred yards from where we stand, less than ninety days perhaps after my return from Appomattox, I horse-whipped a negro wench until her skirts hung in shreds, because upon the streets of this quiet village she had publicly insulted and maligned a Southern lady, and then rushed for protection to these university buildings where was stationed a garrison of 100 federal soldiers.

"I performed the pleasing duty in the immediate presence of the entire garrison, and for thirty nights afterwards slept with a double-barrel shotgun under my head."

The dedication ceremony ended. UNC, after five years of planning, at long last had its Confederate monument.

Meanwhile, Carr's words, those about saving "the very life of the Anglo Saxon race in the South" and "horse-whipping a negro wench," became lost to history. They remained so for almost 100 years, hidden in plain sight in a collection of Carr's papers, until a graduate student discovered them.

Chapter 2: Lingerie and Letters

To Fitzhugh Brundage, a UNC historian who specializes in Southern history, the meaning of Silent Sam was clear the day the statue arrived on campus. Following his argument, any debate about what the statue represented—racism to some, heritage to others—must begin with the origin story.

"The people who created that monument had fixed its meaning," Brundage said, "and they didn't acknowledge any other meanings.... They wanted to fix on the landscape one view of the past."

Walking through the statue's history chronologically allows the reporters to reveal the original intent behind it, hinting at, without yet fully explaining, the pain and anger it would come to represent in modern times.

Stancill and Carter fast-forward through the decades between the statue's erection and more recent history in Chapter 2, illustrating UNC students' lack of concern about the statue and its meaning during those years. At the end of the chapter, the reporters tease readers with the coming conflict once again, preparing them for the turmoil that is in store and urging them to continue reading.

(Continued)

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To Brundage and others who share his view, what Silent Sam represents has never changed. Yet in the first decades after the Confederate monument took its place, the gravity of its meaning appears to have either been temporarily lost, forgotten or ignored. The statue became a light-hearted part of campus lore, and in those days was hardly a divisive symbol.

The first time The Daily Tar Heel, the campus newspaper, described the statue as “Silent Sam” was in February 1954, in a short column entitled “Campus Seen.” “Silent Sam,” so went the brief account in the newspaper, had been seen “holding a pair of 3-D glasses.”

UNC was still one year away from admitting the three men who would become the university’s first three African-American students. At the time, Silent Sam did not attract protests or calls for its removal. It was, instead, more of a target for college pranks and juvenile urban legends—chief among them that the soldier fired his rifle every time a virgin walked past.

Before the UNC-N.C. State football game in 1954, someone smeared the statue with black paint and left a beer bottle at the end of Silent Sam’s rifle, according to an account in The Daily Tar Heel. In 1959, the paper published a column in which a senior wrote about “the lingerie displays that frequently dorn (sic) his rifle barrel.”

The conversation began to change in the mid-1960s. In 1965, one year after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, a UNC student named Al Ribak wrote a letter to the editor of The Daily Tar Heel. Ribak’s letter is the first documented evidence of student opposition to the Confederate monument, according to a collection of Silent Sam documents that UNC has digitized and placed online.

Ribak wrote that while the statue might have “become a part of the UNC tradition, it certainly cannot be argued that traditions should be maintained for tradition’s sake.” He closed his letter with this: “I urge the Daily Tar Heel and the Carolina student body to take up the cause of removing from the campus that shameful commemoration of a disgraceful episode.”

Slowly, a dialogue began, one that the campus newspaper’s archives reflect throughout the late 1960s and early- to- mid-1970s. In 1968, Sharon E. Brown, of the UNC history department, wrote an opinion piece in which she described the conflict of the statue—that it could be seen as both a symbol of Southern pride and as one of oppression.

That same year, graffiti was painted on the statue after Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination, but the next day it was cleaned by students who also placed Confederate flags in the area, according to university archives.

Another five years passed before Aaron B. Fox, a UNC student, wrote to The Daily Tar Heel in 1973. He complained about the lack of representation of black

The journalists add much-needed perspective, illustrating the time period. African American students were not on campus yet, which could be why no one raised much protest in early days.

students in the UNC yearbook. The first three pictures he saw in the most recent edition of the yearbook, Fox wrote, were that of a white student, Silent Sam and “lily white flowers.” Of the statue, Fox wrote, “the picture of Sam is a memorial to those soldiers who fought and died while endeavoring to perpetuate the degradation of black people.”

Two days later the paper published a response from another student, who wrote of Confederate soldiers: “They fought NOT ‘to perpetuate the degradation of black people’ as you state, but the primary issue was the protection of their homes and their way of life.... Please remember this, my black brother, white people also have pride in themselves and their heritage.”

A conversation had started, but Silent Sam’s place on campus remained secure.

Chapter 3: A Historical Smoking Gun •

Those who suggested changes to Silent Sam often suffered consequences.

In 2003, Gerald Horne, a communications studies professor who is African American, wrote to *The Daily Tar Heel*, sarcastically asking why Chapel Hill people were so happy at the TV images of Iraqis tearing down statues of the ousted Saddam Hussein.

“We were instructed sternly that toppling statues was attempting to rewrite history,” Horne said in an interview. The “fusillade” of negative reaction, including harassing phone calls, Horne said, helped him decide to leave for the University of Houston. •

Adam Dombay, a UNC graduate student in history, joined the conversation in 2011, revealing a piece of evidence that would become key to future activism around Silent Sam.

While doing research in the Southern Historical Collection at Wilson Library, Dombay had stumbled upon Carr’s speech from the dedication day. He showed it to several historians, who said they’d never seen it. Dombay wrote a letter to the editor at *The Daily Tar Heel*, with excerpts of Carr’s speech.

Students contacted Dombay to discuss the history he had uncovered. The students were part of a nascent movement called the Real Silent Sam Coalition.

“I said, ‘You’ll never get this thing down,’” Dombay recalled in an interview.

Students within the movement disagreed over their demands when it came to the statue. Some wanted to push for removal; in the end, they chose a more pragmatic approach.

“This home grown group started as wanting to compromise,” said Dombay, now a faculty member at the College of Charleston.

In Chapter 3, history begins to catch up to the present as Stancill and Carter inch readers toward a shift in mood and the growing tension between the opposing sides of the monument argument.

The statement-evidence-quote format is often used in feature storytelling. Naysayers suffered consequences (statement). One professor protested (evidence). His quote illustrates the consequences of his protest using the source’s own words.

(Continued)

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A member of that group, Will McNerney, said in an interview that he had been convinced by the historical context and he wanted others to be educated, too.

“It felt very clear to me that the monument, as it stood, was a misrepresentation of history,” McNerney said. “It felt important that the university, an institution of great academic accomplishment, and an incubator of knowledge—particularly one of great prestige around Southern American history—should have a historically accurate understanding of it.”

On Feb. 15, 2012, the coalition presented a four-point proposal to then-Chancellor Holden Thorp and the trustees.

“Our intent is not to remove monuments or revise history; rather, we seek to challenge the university to provide a more complete historical narrative,” the group’s proposal said. “Through historical accuracy we hope to invigorate a culture at the university that celebrates difference and cultivates a diverse, egalitarian, and truth-seeking student body.”

What the group wanted was a plaque with context about the founding of Silent Sam. But they also asked for a similar-sized statue to honor a prominent African-American, a memorial review process that would occur every decade and an educational component for all students, including the “Black and Blue” tour of black history at UNC.

The Real Silent Sam Coalition didn’t succeed in getting its plaque. But the group’s efforts led to a major turning point in 2015, when the trustees renamed the academic building previously known as Saunders Hall, which had been dedicated for 19th Century Ku Klux Klan leader William Saunders. At the same time, the trustees passed a 16-year moratorium on renaming other buildings and launched a broad effort to curate UNC’s history with accurate markers.

The winds of change were blowing.

In June 2015, Dylann Roof was charged with the racially motivated killing of nine people in a Charleston, S.C., church. The next month, the Confederate flag was removed from the South Carolina State House grounds at the recommendation of then-Gov. Nikki Haley.

About two weeks later, though, North Carolina’s elected leaders took their own stance on history. Then-Gov. Pat McCrory signed into law legislation that prohibited the alteration of historic monuments and “objects of remembrance.”

Chapter 4: Politicians, Protests and Police

The trajectory for Silent Sam may have been set a year ago in another state.

Last August, a white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Va., resulted in the death of a counter-protester and the related deaths of two state police officers in a helicopter crash. The “Unite the Right” march was meant to oppose the removal of a Robert E. Lee statue from a city park.

In the last few paragraphs of Chapter 3, Stancill and Carter speed-walk readers up to the present-day circumstances that laid the groundwork for the campus uproar. In Chapter 4, readers get a walk-through of the months, days and even minutes leading up to the statue’s toppling.

(Continued)

Around the country, Confederate statues began to come down, including overnight secret removals at the University of Texas in Austin and at Duke University. In Durham, the statue in front of the old courthouse was toppled by force at the hands of protesters.

Anti-Silent Sam activists had not been dormant in recent years—they had held organized demonstrations in late 2015 at University Day and at a campus “town hall” meeting on race.

Through generations, the focus on Silent Sam had been maintained by students of color at UNC who kept up the fight. The Black Student Movement had gathered there in 1971 after the murder of a black man killed on campus by a white motorcycle gang; the group led a march during the L.A. riots following the police beating of Rodney King.

But late 2017 was different. There was a new urgency in the air.

Only 10 days after Charlottesville, hundreds of people turned out to a massive demonstration around Silent Sam. They couldn’t get close to the monument, though. Police, wearing helmets, had erected barricades around the statue.

UNC leaders, worried about safety before the protest, had written to Gov. Roy Cooper, a Democrat, asking him to request the state Historical Commission to step in. The Chapel Hill mayor wanted Silent Sam removed, too. Cooper responded that the university was free to take down the statue under a safety hazard provision in the state law.

It didn’t happen. University lawyers disagreed with Cooper’s interpretation of the law. The Republican-dominated UNC Board of Governors members objected to the talks between Cooper and UNC administrators.

So continued a year of sit-ins, a UNC food service boycott, petitions, a threatened civil rights lawsuit, public hearing speeches and other attempts by Silent Sam’s opponents. One day last September, students took drums, pots and pans and party horns to Chancellor Carol Folt’s office to get her attention.

Folt admitted it would be better for the university if the statue were moved.

“I do believe that as long as Silent Sam is in its current location, it runs the risk of continuing to drain energy and goodwill that we worked so hard to maintain on our campus, and truly does distract us from reaching the important goals we all share,” she said at a trustee meeting last year, as reported by *The News & Observer*.

But, she maintained, her hands were tied.

Meanwhile, student government, faculty leaders and various academic departments, one by one, called on Folt, UNC boards and elected leaders to work out some plan to move Silent Sam.

The journalists remind us of the historical context, not only pointing to the recent past but emphasizing that this issue has spanned generations of students.

(Continued)

In April, graduate student Maya Little poured red ink and some of her own blood on the statue in broad daylight. She was arrested and charged with criminal vandalism and an honor court violation at UNC. She said she was providing her own context to the statue—with black blood symbolizing the violence of the past.

UNC continued with its plans to erect new signs with historical context and interactive online resources. The university also spent \$390,000 on security around the monument last fiscal year, and drew scorn when campus police sent in an undercover officer to infiltrate a sit-in.

Graduation came and went, and Silent Sam still stood.

On Monday, at the beginning of a new academic year, UNC's Center for the Study of the American South posted a statement saying the university's inaction was immoral. Malinda Lowery, the director, called for the legal removal of Silent Sam, which she said was "a misogynist insult" to women that "whitewashes the past."

"Silent Sam' stands in the way of our purpose," she wrote.

By midnight, Silent Sam had fallen.

Chapter 5: To be Continued ●

UNC's statue saga isn't over.

As the bronze soldier lies in storage somewhere, counter protests are planned. UNC President Margaret Spellings and UNC Board of Governors Chairman Harry Smith called the protest "unacceptable, dangerous and incomprehensible," and said "mob rule" won't be tolerated.

They promised a full investigation and on Friday, police took out three arrest warrants against protesters.

But so far, UNC officials are quiet on the question of what happens next with Silent Sam. One Board of Governors member said the statue would be reinstalled within 90 days. ●

Barbara Rimer, the dean of UNC's Gillings School of Global Public Health, sent a letter to the Gillings school Tuesday. In it, she suggested a monument to a person who promoted peace, equity or prevention, instead of a return to Silent Sam, who, she said, "spoke loudly."

"It's no wonder that, as other states sought to move beyond the past by removing statues, our inability to do so caused wounds to fester until the pain became unbearable," Rimer said. "It is not surprising that it happened Monday night. It is only surprising that it did not happen sooner. One hundred and five years of simmering were bound to lead to a boil."

McInerney, the UNC alumnus, poet and a Cambridge University graduate student, said he found Monday's outcome completely comprehensible.

The most important piece of any historical feature is tying the past to the present and future. This is largely what separates many of these stories from encyclopedia entries. Where do the people who are impacted go from here? How will the past continue to influence us today? Chapter 5 reminds readers that this story is far from over.

Readers are reminded that this story still has a lot of unanswered questions. The subsequent sources echo the chaos. They have strong opinions, but it is clear they are still trying to process what has happened and what the future holds.

(Continued)

“As the first public university, one embedded in the American South, this is not a thing that’s going away,” he said.

“The conversation is heating up, and we need to lean in to that conversation and continue to do this hard work around understanding our past.”

When reporting these types of historical features, reporters need to answer the following questions:

- How did this item/place/group come to exist?
- Why was it needed at the time?
- How has it or the need for it changed over the years?
- How do people feel about it now?
- What is its future?

Historical features can also be related to a specific time peg. Reporters often do stories to mark significant anniversaries and events, usually at 5- or 10-year intervals. However, some events are significant enough to merit stories every year. For instance, publications throughout the U.S. publish historical features every Sept. 11 in memory of those killed in the deadly terrorism attacks in 2001.

Not all historical features are based on tragedies. Think about influential organizations, buildings, people or events in your community. How long have they been around, and how long has it been since someone really looked into their formation and purpose?

Time pegs tied to holidays and awareness months are also good fodder for historical features. Think about a yearlong calendar. What time pegs exist, and what kinds of stories could you come up with for each month?

Explainer Features

Feature stories explaining how to accomplish a certain task or goal tend to be popular with readers because of their relatability. How-to stories, ranging from practical time peg articles to more arbitrary evergreen stories, usually sprout from a question that might be on the minds of people in the community. Practical explainers can provide readers with information they need at a particular time. For example, *azcentral.com* published “How to Register to Vote in Arizona’s November Election—Don’t Get Left Out” one month before the state’s voter registration deadline. As college students prepared to move back into their residence halls, *Buzzfeed* published the article “How To: Showcase Your Space,” providing tips for decorating dorm rooms (see Figure 2.7).

Figure 2.7 Using Time Pegs for Story Ideas

Month	Time Peg	Story Idea
January	New Year's Day	Popular New Year's resolutions
February	Black History Month	Profiles of famous black scientists
March	Women's History Month	A historical look at the suffragette movement
April	Autism Awareness Month	Progress toward diagnoses and treatments over the years
May	Pentecost	How is this Christian holiday separated by multiple denominations?
June	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Pride Month	Look at same-sex equality laws in countries around the world
July	World Population Day	What do scientists hope to accomplish on this day?
August	Eid al-Adha	How do Muslims in America commemorate the "Festival of Sacrifice"?
September	National Literacy Month	Programs with dogs visiting schools so children can read to them
October	National Dental Hygiene Month	Historical piece on wooden teeth and how they were used in early dentistry
November	Veterans Day	Profiles of noncombat war veterans talking about their behind-the-scenes work
December	World AIDS Day	A look at HIV/AIDS portrayals in popular culture

Evergreen articles tend to be popular among magazines and address needs specific to their audience. Forbes magazine gears stories toward its readers in the finance and business industries, routinely publishing how-to features examining workplace and consumer questions, such as "How to Boost Your Value in the Workplace" and "How to Help Your Children Minimize Future Student Loan Debt." Conversely, Teen Vogue, which covers issues important to middle school, high school and early college students, publishes explanatory pieces, including "How to Deal With Seeing Your Ex at School" and "How to Fix Bad Box Hair Dye."

Explainers can also be used to provide background information or clarification on a topic. These too can be either time sensitive or arbitrary, as illustrated by The New York Times. When a heat wave hit New York City, the newspaper published "Why We All Need to Drink More During Hot Weather Exercise." One month earlier, "Women Outlive Men: Why Do They Retire Earlier?" explained the issue in an evergreen story.

Writing and reporting an explainer feature is not as simple as voicing your own thoughts on a topic. Successful explainers should be relatable, informative and interesting so readers will want to share them. Here are some tips:

- **Choose something important to readers, not just to you.**
 - **NO:** Top 10 things that bother me about school.
 - **YES:** Top 10 student complaints about school.
- **Be appealing by narrowing your topic.**
 - **NO:** Ways to get in shape for summer.
 - **YES:** *Fun* ways to get in shape for summer.
- **Specify your target audience when possible.**
 - **NO:** Top 10 student hangouts.
 - **YES:** Top 10 middle school student hangouts in downtown Charlotte.

Transforming explainers from soft news or opinion articles into more newsworthy pieces requires good feature reporting and writing skills. Be sure to get sources to explain their processes and reactions rather than inserting your own opinion. It is also a good idea to get a diverse array of sources. Interview experts who know a lot about the topic, as well as average citizens who might be trying something for the first time. When writing, use emotional quotes and paraphrase facts. Having your sources reflect on their experience with the topic through quotes and thoughtful paraphrasing will resonate more with readers than if the reporter simply tells them how the sources feel. For example:

NO: Pilates became a popular low-impact alternative to yoga for fitness fanatics in the 2000s.

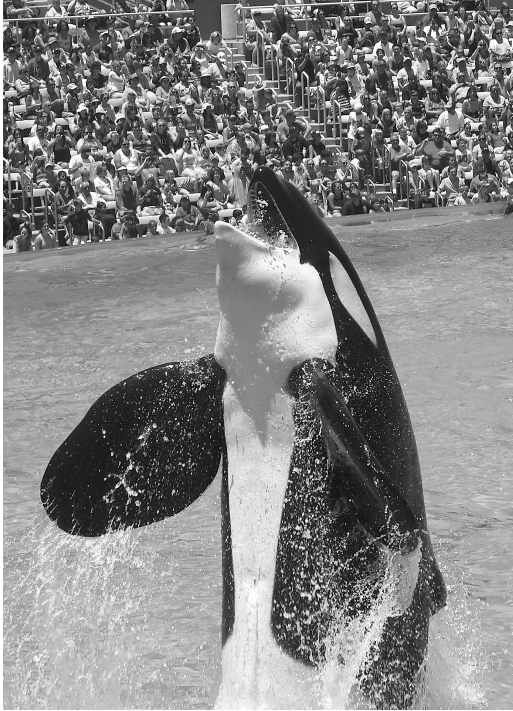
“I dropped two pant sizes during the last year,” yoga enthusiast Mandy Smith said. “I do yoga about four times each week.”

YES: Pilates became a popular low-impact alternative to yoga for fitness fanatics in the 2000s.

Mandy Smith says she enjoys the combination of strength and stretching exercises associated with Pilates. Smith credits weekly classes with helping her drop two pant sizes last year.

“It’s such a wonderful way to relax and sweat at the same time,” she said. “You don’t feel like you’re wearing yourself out, but the results speak for themselves.”

To practice writing and reporting thorough explainers, consider a broad question you can ask people around you: What are your favorite things to do in your town/city? Talk with people on the street, and turn their responses into a news story.



One of several iterations of Sea World's popular killer whale, Shamu, performing for fans.

Pixabay/@nightowl

Opinion Features

Opinion writing allows reporters to use first-person language and share their personal thoughts and experiences with readers. Because reporters are called upon to be unbiased, they need to be careful in choosing what topics they share their opinion about. For example, a politics reporter should *not* write a column praising the efforts of one political party over another, but she may write about why it is important to vote. A business reporter should *not* write an opinion piece advising people what stocks to buy or sell, but he may offer insight to readers on how to find a stockbroker and get started with trading.

While there is potential for ethical conflicts of interest in opinion writing, stories that make reporters seem “human” and relatable like these tend to attract readers. The New York Times learned this in 2006, when columnist Amy Sutherland wrote an article about her own marriage. “What Shamu Taught Me About a Happy Marriage” relayed Sutherland’s use—on her husband—of positive affirmation techniques that she had learned while researching exotic

animal training. The column was filled with anecdotes, advice and a blend of humor and personal reflection. And although the story was not actually about a beloved killer whale, readers regularly clicked on the story because it appealed to their cravings—self-improvement and animals. The result: It was the most emailed story of 2006 for The New York Times, beating out coverage of the execution of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein and other important news events.

Feature reporters have to be descriptive, a useful tool in opinion writing. First-person stories should engage readers’ senses. Using similes and metaphors can help readers without knowledge of the topic put your experience into perspective. For example, instead of describing something as “thick” or “heavy,” consider relating the texture to your experience with it: “The water was viscous, like paddling through a vat of honey.”

When writing a column or first-person article, reporters need to establish a clear point and carry the reader from start to finish without veering in different directions. Opinion writers also need a strong **voice**—a personal style of writing that conveys the reporter’s character. Times Union (Albany, New York) reporter Betsy Bitner uses humor—with a dash of self-deprecation—and vivid imagery to tell stories through her columns, as illustrated in this excerpt about retail discount cards:

There are all sorts of things you can collect without even trying, like junk mail, dust and phobias. Me, I collect those little plastic cards that stores give out that

you put on your key chain. They're called customer loyalty or rewards cards and I never turn one down when it's offered. I guess I have a hard time saying no (although my husband might dispute that claim).

There are advantages to carrying around a couple of pounds of customer loyalty cards. For one thing, I never lose my car keys because it's hard to misplace something with a mass large enough to influence the tides. And they add enough weight to my purse that it qualifies as a lethal weapon. It would be nice if at least one of the cards was for a discounted chiropractic adjustment.⁹

Opinion columns often follow a similar pattern that can serve as an outline for you:

- **Introduction:** Make a bold statement about your topic.
- **Exposition:** Explain your previous feelings or experiences with the topic, providing relevant background information to help readers understand where you are coming from.
- **Description:** Give a highly visual play-by-play to keep the reader engrossed in the story.
- **Closing:** Reflect on what you have learned and how you feel about the topic now.

Readers often enjoy stories from people who are pushed out of their “comfort zone.” Consider practicing your opinion writing with a barrier-breaker column. Choose something you have not done before or want to do in a different way. Try it, and take the reader along for the experience through your writing.

Digital Age Features

In the Digital Age, journalists are encouraged to tell stories in innovative, audience-centric ways. Beyond the story types outlined above, new feature story formats have emerged, reflecting changes in both structure and purpose.

Alternative Storytelling Forms

Readers do not always have the time or the inclination to read a full feature story. Journalists can still convey interesting and useful information using **alternative story forms**—short, descriptive features that stand alone to tell a story without the accompaniment of a traditional written article.¹⁰ They provide readers an intriguing break from monotonous articles, and they can sometimes better help readers understand a complicated issue by making it more visual or interactive.

The most common alternative story forms in print and online publications tend to be stand-alone photos or photo galleries and graphics. The investigative

One Night on a Private Garbage Truck in New York City

By Al Shaw, ProPublica, and Kiera Feldman, the Investigative Fund, January 4, 2018

New York's residential trash is hauled away by the city, but private companies collect trash thrown away by businesses. Every night, an army of private trucks zig-zag across the city, making hundreds of stops each. Facing far more dangerous conditions than city workers, these drivers often work longer hours for less money. Follow one driver's route in August 2016. | Related Story »

2:49 a.m.
Time

60.6
Miles Traveled

RESTART ↕

At the end of the night, Caban and his helper had driven 60 miles over nearly 8 hours. And that was only a half-shift.

ProPublica's interactive graphic demonstrating garbage truck routes through the streets of New York City.

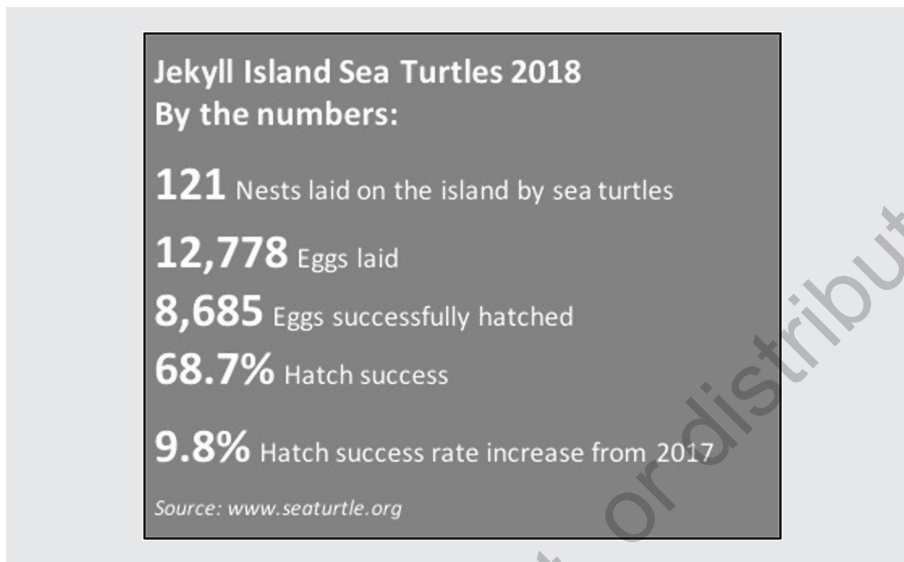
ProPublica, "One Night on a Private Garbage Truck in New York City," by Al Shaw and Kiera Feldman.

news site ProPublica created an interactive feature mapping the route of a private garbage truck driver through the streets of New York City. The graphic consists of a map of the city's largest neighborhoods. When the reader clicks the play button, the map springs to life, clocking the time elapsed and miles traveled, with captions marking each of the truck driver's stops as they are charted across the map. The interactivity of the map allows readers to truly understand the long distances and dangerous conditions drivers face as they traverse the city. Throughout the journey, pop-up captions detail the struggles drivers face, offer quotes from the drivers and provide impactful numbers demonstrating their work efforts.¹¹

Alternative story forms are limited only by journalists' imaginations. Other common examples include:

- **Breakout boxes:** These are short boxes containing tidbits of information that may be helpful to the reader. Examples include a glossary to help readers understand new terms or jargon related to a topic; follow-up boxes detailing what is known, what is new and what is next; takeaways providing bulleted highlights from a meeting or event; and boxes using numbers to provide information,¹² as in this example shown in Figure 2.8.
- **Q & A:** Question and Answer features provide a transcript of an interview with a source, showing your questions and your source's direct answers.

Figure 2.8 A sample breakout box that could run alongside a traditional news story on the same topic.



Source: <http://www.seaturtle.org/>

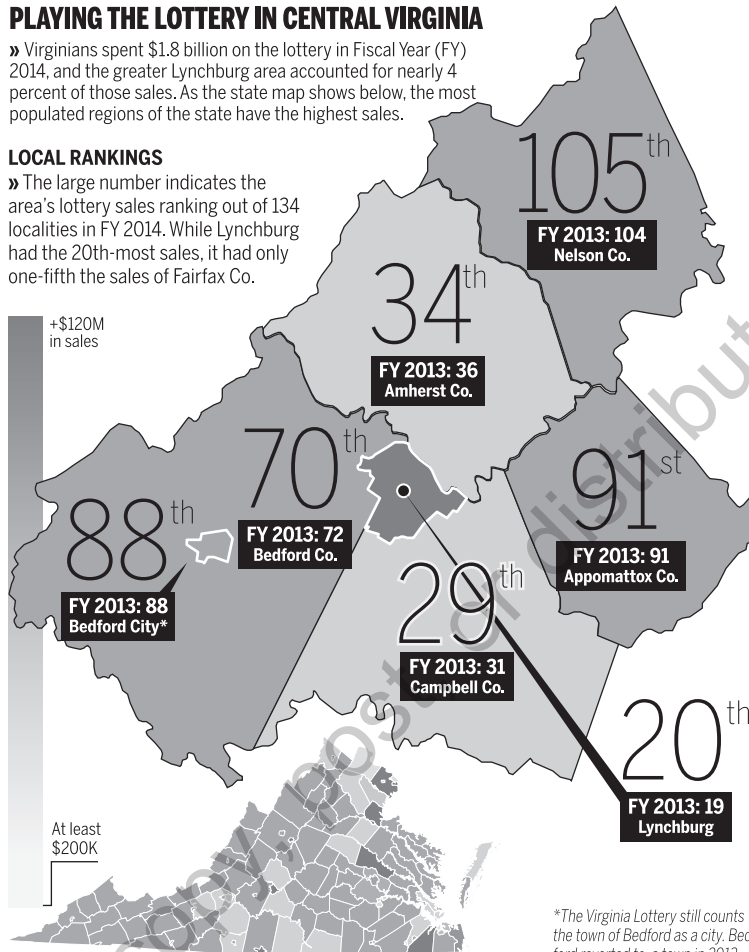
- **FAQ:** Frequently Asked Questions features list quick answers to popular questions readers might have on a subject. For example, in preparation for a state fair, readers may ask about the cost, dates, what rides are included, what performers are playing and so forth.
- **Reader polls:** These may include a short introductory graf educating readers on an issue before asking them to engage by voting with their opinion and/or leaving comments.
- **Charts:** Charts provide a simple visual reference to help readers process data and numbers quickly. In one example from *The News & Advance* in Lynchburg, Virginia, reporter Shawn Garrett shows how lottery sales in the area compare with others in the state. The arrangement of the rankings within the map, separated by counties, provides a powerful illustration the audience can quickly understand. Readers can also easily see the dramatic disparity between Lynchburg proper and its surrounding counties.¹³
- **Games:** Some news organizations urge readers to process information using games, such as news quizzes. *StudentNewsDaily.com* is a nonprofit current events website for high school students. One of the online publication's features is a weekly news quiz, testing students on their retention of information from the week's events.

PLAYING THE LOTTERY IN CENTRAL VIRGINIA

» Virginians spent \$1.8 billion on the lottery in Fiscal Year (FY) 2014, and the greater Lynchburg area accounted for nearly 4 percent of those sales. As the state map shows below, the most populated regions of the state have the highest sales.

LOCAL RANKINGS

» The large number indicates the area's lottery sales ranking out of 134 localities in FY 2014. While Lynchburg had the 20th-most sales, it had only one-fifth the sales of Fairfax Co.



*The Virginia Lottery still counts the town of Bedford as a city. Bedford reverted to a town in 2013.

This chart from The News & Advance in Lynchburg, Virginia, is a visually appealing representation of the distribution of lottery sales in the area compared with others across the state.

The News & Advance, "Playing the Lottery in Central Virginia," by Shawn Garrett.

Locality ranking	Number of retailers**	Tot. sales FY 2014	Growth over FY '13	Per-capita sales FY '14
1. Fairfax County	320	\$124,432,282	6%	\$110.03
20. Lynchburg	84	\$25,402,141	5%	\$325.61
29. Campbell Co.	59	\$13,994,914	12%	\$253.37
34. Amherst Co.	27	\$12,202,777	10%	\$379.23
70. Bedford Co.	33	\$6,365,169	10%	\$91.16
88. Bedford City	14	\$4,369,127	3%	\$734.55
91. Appomattox Co.	27	\$4,320,978	9%	\$283.25
105. Nelson County	13	\$3,040,533	10%	\$205.59
134. Highland Co.	3	\$201,346	-10%	\$90.90

*The Virginia Lottery counts the town of Bedford as a city. Bedford reverted to a town in 2013. **As of the final week of FY14.

SOURCE: VIRGINIA LOTTERY; US CENSUS BUREAU

TOP LOCAL SELLER

» The top seller of Virginia Lottery tickets in the area is also a top seller statewide. **Fuel City (Smile Gas) at 5201 South Amherst Highway** in Madison Heights is first in sales here and 5th overall in Virginia with \$2,206,298 in FY 2014. The location was 6th overall in FY 2013 with \$2,014,175

SHAWN GARRETT/THE NEWS & ADVANCE

We will cover more alternative story forms using mobile apps in Chapter 11.

Anticipating Shareable Stories

Digital Age journalists need to be able to anticipate their audience's needs. As we discussed earlier, that does not mean pandering by publishing vapid puff pieces and entertainment rumors. But it *does* mean we have to think like our readers do. When users want information, they often turn to a search engine, typing in a question and clicking on the first of thousands of responses. By anticipating the types of questions readers might have, journalists can add their stories to the Google results list and become a reliable source for readers to click on. Paying attention to trending topics could clue journalists in to what questions people might have on their minds at a particular time. For example, you might notice the hashtag #sharkattack trending during the summer, indicating that people are concerned about a perceived sudden increase in shark attacks on humans. What sorts of things might people search for related to that topic?

- Has the number of shark attacks increased this year?
- Why has the number of shark attacks increased?
- How many shark attacks have there been in the U.S.?
- How many people have been killed by sharks?
- What can I do to prevent a shark attack?

Gathering information from a reputable source, such as a reported news article, can provide peace of mind for people. And by anticipating readers' questions, you can help your news organization become a source readers across the country can turn to for information.

Knowing *why* our readers share content online can also provide valuable insight into the types of stories they want. A marketing team from The New York Times conducted research to determine what motivates people to share news on social media.¹⁴ The reasons they uncovered could lead journalists to write stories appealing to those needs.

- **To bring valuable and entertaining content to others:** Stories containing novelty and/or impact appeal to news sharers who want to entertain or educate their friends and followers.
- **To define ourselves to others:** Profiles, how-to articles and other features that give readers the opportunity to relate an issue or another person's journey to their own will prompt them to share those articles.
- **To grow and nourish our relationships:** Features that provide understanding about how *others* live can prompt readers to share their findings in hopes of expanding the insight they have gained.

- **Self-fulfillment:** In-depth articles explaining the background or details of an issue or event can help readers reinforce their commitment to or beliefs about a subject, which they will happily share with like-minded followers.
- **To get the word out about causes or brands:** Readers who feel passionate about a subject will seek feature stories truly examining their causes so they can share and feel good about them.

Communicating directly with readers to discover what questions they have and what stories they want reported is also essential in the Digital Age. We will learn more about community engagement journalism in Chapter 7.

Investigations and Fact-Checking

The rise of the internet as a news tool has made it even more crucial for journalists to embrace **watchdog journalism**—the use of dogged reporting to protect citizens and prevent corruption and misinformation from negatively impacting society. As we discussed in Chapter 1, the internet has become a free and simple way to produce and distribute fake news and false information. Readers expect journalists in the Digital Age to fight back by rooting out the sources of misinformation and deception and providing the truth through investigative reporting.

Journalists produce investigative features to hold those in power accountable. These news features may be as simple as monitoring and publishing restaurant health inspection results in your community so residents know where it may be unsafe to eat. They may also include deeper investigations into ongoing problems, tracking their results and checking in with people who are affected by the issue. The fact-checking website PolitiFact uses an alternative storytelling form to fulfill its watchdog function. The organization’s “Truth-O-Meter” assesses statements from politicians and leaders, marking them along a spectrum of truth using labels such as “True,” “Half True,” “Mostly False” and “Pants on Fire” (meaning the statement is completely false). Reporters post a statement made by a person or group, rank it along the spectrum and link it to a story explaining why the statement is true or false and how they came to that conclusion.¹⁵

Many news consumers in the Digital Age are experiencing a phenomenon psychologists and media analysts refer to as **news fatigue**—the feeling of being overwhelmed by the amount of news coverage, typically in reference to a single issue, resulting in feelings of exhaustion or depression. A 2018 study found that almost 70% of Americans felt news fatigue, largely stemming from the amount of coverage devoted to the 2016 presidential election.¹⁶ One solution is for media to focus more on **constructive journalism**—reporting that does not focus solely on negativity and problems but rather helps readers understand issues more fully and look toward solutions. These types of investigative features shy away from telling readers what to think. Instead, journalists recognize the impact of their reporting on society and use their work to provide insight on what is going on in the community and empower citizens to recognize their roles in their communities and

spur change.¹⁷ The United Kingdom–based Positive News Magazine capitalizes on readers’ hunger for constructive journalism. The publication delivers short feature stories that demonstrate how people are addressing problems rather than dwelling on the problems themselves. In this article excerpt, reporter Gavin Haines briefly addresses a conflict, then immediately shifts to profiling a promising program and individuals who are working toward a solution:

The debate has raged in recent months: is the climate crisis being given due prominence on school curriculums?

Four young students at Cheney school in Oxford think not, and so in March launched a petition calling for more lessons on the subject. The petition has since been signed by almost 82,000 people.

Though climate change is taught in science and geography lessons, critics say that isn’t enough. But rather than waiting for the UK government to integrate the subject into the curriculum further, teachers are taking matters into their own hands by enrolling on the United Nations’ Climate Change Teacher Academy.¹⁸

We will learn about solutions-based stories like these in greater depth in Chapter 8.

TAKEAWAYS

After reading this chapter, you should understand that:

1. **News is valuable.** Journalists use news values to assess whether an event should become a story. These values can help reporters identify what news events impact a community and in what ways, which can help them better relate their stories to readers.
2. **Stories are everywhere.** Coming up with story ideas can be challenging, but using your knowledge of news values and basic human needs can help you brainstorm ideas that are either time specific or timeless.
3. **Feature stories help people relate.** People love feature stories because they are often descriptive and engaging. Using different storytelling techniques can help you convey news in ways that are interesting and impactful for your audience.
4. **The possibilities are endless.** We have just scratched the surface on feature story types. In the Digital Age, new storytelling strategies are needed, which we will explore in greater depth throughout this book.

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