

## Feature Story Structure Tipsheet

By Doug Cospers

The best way to organize hard news (“new” news about something that recently happened) is the inverted pyramid structure – the essential facts in the lead and the rest of the story in order of importance.

Journalists have more freedom to write feature, or “soft” news stories. Feature stories can take many forms and can be about just about anything. They can be reports of events that take readers deeper into the story, such as a vivid, detailed and personal telling of a crime. They can be about issues or phenomena, such as the rising cost of health care, miniskirts coming into fashion, or global warming. They can be personality profiles with only one source. But most feature stories have many sources, often including documents and the reporter’s own first-hand observations along with interviews with people,

Unlike hard news stories, feature stories have a beginning, a middle and an end. The journalist can use more creativity and experiment with writing styles, but the basic standards of professional journalism still apply. Like hard news stories, feature stories are accurate, fair and balanced and never hints at the reporter’s opinion.

The best way to learn feature writing is to read good feature stories, in the foreign press if necessary, and learn from your colleagues. There are many feature writing styles, but journalists have found one story structure for features that always tells stories in an interesting and organized way that is used all over the world. It works like this:

The story begins with an **anecdote**. An anecdote is a “little story within a story” that illustrates the main point of the story. It almost always is about a real person or feature story invites readers to identify with them and arouses their interest in your story.

For example, if you are writing a feature story about the effects of a new income tax increase in the country, you might start with an anecdote about the Smith family:

*Hanging on the wall in Mr. and Mrs. Smith’s living room is a color photograph of their only daughter smiling broadly as she enrolls in a private university to study law.*

*“She was so happy begin her studies at such as a good university. She worked so hard to get there. All her life she has wanted to be a lawyer,” said Mr. Smith.*

*“But it is very expensive, and now with these changes we don’t know if we can still afford to pay her tuition.”*

With this anecdotal lead, you have allowed real people to introduce your readers to the subject of your feature story. Readers can identify with real people more easily than they can with a statement of fact. They are curious about what is troubling the Smiths and what will happen to their daughter. But readers still don’t know exactly why they are reading about the Smiths and their daughter’s education. You will tell them this next in what is called a **“nut paragraph”** or “so what?” paragraph. The nut paragraph answers the question, “so what?” in the reader’s mind. For example:

*“The Smith family is among millions of middle-class families and citizens who are reconsidering their future plans because of the recent 15 percent increase in the national income tax.*

Now the readers know exactly what your story will be about.

Now you give them all of the **“who, what, when, where, why, how and how much”** of the story. You tell them when the tax increase was passed. You let a government official tell them why it was increased and how the government will spend the money it will raise. You let citizens groups tell you why they think it is a bad idea and an unfair tax. You let more citizens tell the readers about what it means to them. Try to use transitions, or sentences that tie paragraphs together, as you write.

When you have given the reader the complete story of the new tax and how it affects citizens, you are ready to **end** your story. Many journalists let the people in the anecdotal lead end their stories for them. This ties story together for the reader, and can answer the first question in the reader’s mind: “What will happen to the Smiths?”

For example:

*The Smiths looked closely at their budget and found that they could save about 10 percent per year if they stopped eating some meals in restaurants and did not buy many new clothes. They decided to try to let their daughter finish law school.*

*“Then maybe she can get a good job and help us pay this new tax!” Mrs. Smith said.*

### **REMEMBER:**

- You must start with a good story idea. A good idea and a lot of work will lead to a good story. Even the best writers can’t make a good story from a bad idea.
- Report the story thoroughly. If the facts you gather are strong, your story will be strong. If they are not, then you probably don’t have a story.
- Use your senses! Carefully observe sights, sounds, feelings, tastes and smells during your reporting and use them in your story. Details and vivid descriptions make a story come alive.
- When writing, feel free to be creative while remaining true to professional journalistic standards. Experiment!
- When you are finished, put the story down and wait a day. Then rewrite it to make it stronger. Some journalists rewrite a story several times before it is published.