

HOW TO REPORT AND WRITE POWERFUL IN-DEPTH NEWS FEATURES –THE BASICS

By Doug Cospers

Powerful, in-depth news features are among the most valuable stories that you can give to your readers. They don't just inform, they open up new worlds for your readers to wonder about. They shine the light of truth on social problems and can cause readers and officials to take action to correct injustice and improve people's lives. They offer you a chance to be more creative in style – no more rigid rules of the inverted pyramid.

But in-depth features are not for the lazy. As with all things worth doing, they take practice – a lot of practice – and a lot of work. A good in-depth news feature will require interviews with many sources and take days or weeks to complete, especially if you can only afford to work on them for 1-2 hours of your busy day.

Great feature stories start with great ideas. Most of the power of a story begins here, with an idea or an angle on an idea that no one has thought to write about before. A great idea poorly executed can still produce a decent story. A bad idea brilliantly written will always yield a bad story. But just coming up with a great idea isn't enough, the idea must be **focused** tightly enough so that you can tell a full, complete story and not drown your reader in a sea of loosely-related information.

Good in-depth news writing is vivid story telling. Try to remember that your job is not to “educate” your readers, your job is to engage them in a fascinating story woven with colorful threads of humanity and facts. You do that by finding knowledgeable, colorful sources, interviewing them skillfully for strong quotations and detailed descriptions of their experiences – and letting *them* tell the story, *not you*. Your readers shouldn't find a trace of YOU in the story.

The Basic Format

Each in-depth news feature is unique and wants to be written uniquely for maximum power. But it takes years of experience and a good deal of passion for storytelling to know what form each story should take. It is a skill of the gut, and as beginning feature writers you should not expect to get the hang of it right away. Fortunately, there is a tried and true path to writing a good in-depth news feature.

Probably the most reliable and powerful format for an in-depth news story that aims to illuminate an issue, and most in-depth stories do illuminate an issue or phenomenon, is the **anecdotal lead** followed by a strong **nut graf**, a story **body** and an **ending**. You should master this form before experimenting with others.

Here's how it works:

The **anecdotal lead** takes the BIG story and makes it small. Few readers want to be hit in the face with big problems they cannot do anything about, even if the problems involve important public policy issues. The anecdotal lead is a “little story within a BIG story” that introduces readers to real people like themselves who are affected by the BIG story you're about to tell. Readers become interested in what happens to the people in your anecdote, and so they can more easily digest the sometimes complicated story to follow.

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For example, you want to tell a story about the increasing desertification of Myanmar farmland. The story will be a complex one, touching on agricultural practices and policies. Many readers in Yangon may not be interested in this story, but you know it's important. If you want to pull your readers into a story like this, begin with an anecdote lead:

Ko Win Thein leaned on his hoe, wiped the sweat from his eyes with his sleeve, and gazed out over his 12 acres planted in maize. It would be another poor crop this year, he predicted.

“When I was a boy helping my father farm this land, the maize stalks were so thick that even I had a hard time walking among them. The land was good to us then,” he said. “Now look at it, cracked and dry like scalp of a novice with ringworm.”

Now you've hooked your readers, and they want to know what is going on and what will become of Ko Win Thein and his family farm. They don't know what the story is about yet, but already they care about one farmer. Your story idea must be sufficiently focused from the beginning so that you can recognize a good anecdotal lead when it comes along in the course of your reporting. You probably will have to fish for it. Journalists are good at fishing for anecdotes.

After reading your anecdotal lead, your readers will want to know why they are reading about a farmer worried about his land. They want to know right away what this story is going to be about. The **nut graf** will satisfy them. The nut graf, or “so what?” graf, follows directly after the anecdotal lead. For example:

Ko Win Thein's farm is on the edge of one of three growing regions in Myanmar that are turning from productive farms to desert. Agricultural experts say that this process, called desertification, will continue to gobble up tens of thousands of acres of farmland each year unless measures are taken to stop it.

Now your readers know why you told them about Ko Win Thein and what your story is about. The nut graf also ties the anecdotal lead to the main part of the story – **the body**. In this section you will **SHOW** (not tell) your readers the story **in great detail**. You will:

- show your readers how bad the problem is with **numbers and educated estimates by experts**. How common is it? Who does it affect? What is the cost? What is the potential cost if nothing is done? (This is best done right after the nut graf.)

- help them understand how and why it is happening by quoting sources who really know. You'll give the **background**, including the history, readers need to really understand the problem.

- ask qualified sources to **analyze** your findings – what does it mean?

- look at what is being done about the problem and explore **possible solutions** with qualified sources.

- ask what might happen in the future if the problem is not dealt with.

- answer all of **the 5W and H questions** so that when your readers finish the story, they are experts of a sort on the subject, too.

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- continue to let Ko Win Thein share his experiences now and then that help tell the story, and include **more anecdotes** from other farmers affected.
- organize your material logically (outlines help). Keep related information together.

Finally, **the ending** ties it all together in a meaningful and powerful way, often by making the story small and easy to see again with help of the human being who introduced it in the anecdotal lead. A powerful ending should invite your reader into a few moments of silent contemplation. For example:

Ko Win Thein has joined the effort to fight back against the desert. He and his township farm cooperative are working to ban slash-and-burn farming and to promote more responsible cattle grazing.

“I we fail, then the desert will win, and I will be the last of a long line of farmers to work this land,” he said. “We cannot fail.”

Here are more tips to help guide your reporting and writing:

- You probably will use only about one third of the information you collect. Use only the strongest facts, quotes and anecdotes. Write tight.
- Never assume your readers know anything about your story subject. They will need a lot of background.
- Research the topic before you begin reporting, including on the internet.
- 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.
- Try to use all three of the main sources of information: Observation, Documents and People.
- Conduct thorough interviews – probe deeply and gather good anecdotes, quotes and detailed descriptions. Meet your sources where they work to get the best interviews.
- Use only the strongest quotes. Paraphrase the rest.
- 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.
- Avoid the first person. Stay out of your story!
- Introduce new sources in transitions before you quote them. Readers should always know who is speaking BEFORE the quote begins.
- Feature stories, like hard news stories, must be Accurate, Fair and Balanced.
- Consider using graphics to take excessive numbers out of the story. Charts, graphs and lists can make your story more appealing.
- Remember that powerful photos will amplify the power of your story.
- Consider using sidebars for important information that doesn't fit in your story.
- If there is time, set your story aside for a day or two. Then, perhaps with the help of a good editor, rewrite it until you get it right.