HOW TO WRITE AN EFFECTIVE NEWS FEATURE

What is a news feature?
A news feature tells a complete story. With competing media outlets and limited time, reporters—especially those in broadcast and radio—prefer to have the entire picture presented to them with all of the pieces already researched.

A news feature goes deeper than just a press release. It thoroughly explores an issue. In order to write a feature, you need to provide research, facts, statistics, and, most importantly, interviews or sources. It takes more time and effort to create a feature than a press release, but the results are often remarkably better.

Where do you start in writing one?
To begin, it’s important to have a clear idea of what you are going to write about—one clear, concise statement that sums up the story you want to tell.

One way to avoid wasting time is to create a “story map.” Story mapping consists of your general idea—the clear statement of the story you want to tell—and the different angles, or ways the story can be told. Once you have a number of angles to the story, choose one. For example, a general feature on social work could follow the angles of mental health, health, or child welfare to name just a few.

Once you choose one area, such as mental health, the next step is to brainstorm the angles within the topic area. In this case, you could focus on children’s mental health, mental health care for women on TANF, or mental health treatment in rural areas where there aren’t many psychiatrists to prescribe and diagnose.

How do you choose an angle?
Based on the many different angles you come up with, decide what the main angle for your story is going to be. You can narrow your choices by reading and listening to as many news outlets as possible, then determining what is hot in the news or what you would like to know more about. You may have different angles for different outlets depending on their audience. For example, choosing mental health care in rural areas and explaining how social workers practice in this setting gives you a story idea to focus on—but depending on the audience, it may have different facets. Again, if the media outlet is a local parenting magazine, how do parents of children with mental health problems in rural areas make sure their children receive proper treatment? For a story on your local nightly news, you may want to have a broader focus, where do people receive mental health treatment in your local area? What role does the social worker have versus the primary care physician in rural areas?

How do you fill in the blanks?
Next, you need to become an expert on your subject. You need to research as much information as possible. You need to do some secondary research on the Web to locate existing information about your subject. You can also search Social Work Abstracts at your university library for research already performed on your subject area.

Perhaps the most important piece, though, is the primary research based on interviews. Talking to social workers who work in rural areas would be the first step in our proposed story. To find a social worker in a specific area, you could use the clinical register (Web site link) or talk to researchers who have worked in this area.

While you are completing your research, it’s important to keep your focus. Keep asking yourself what information is really important. After you have done your homework, it’s time to write.

What’s the difference between features and press releases?
Features are the crown jewels of news stories, where you can have a little more freedom in getting your message across than when you are simply issuing a press release.

Press releases are “hard” news. They present the facts in a clear concise manner, with one or two quotes and little background information. A news feature, on the other hand, tells a story in a creative and fun way. There’s no single best way to write a news feature, except to try to make your readers feel like they are there.

See also “What is News?”

How do you put it all together?
A news feature is really just a set of mental images—in this case, about the need for social work services in rural mental health settings; descriptions of primary care physicians who are not specifically trained in mental health, but are often the only prescribers of medication available in these regions; and the need for social workers to help with diagnoses and to provide mental health counseling. If these scenes are thought through creatively and skillfully, they will come together easily.

In a feature, it’s not necessary to start with a typical lead that tells the “who, what, where, when, and why.” You have freedom to develop your ideas as you go. Just remember that you need an interesting, catchy lead to make your readers want to continue to read through the story.

You are responsible for taking all of the pieces of the puzzle and putting them together so that the readers understand the point/s you are trying to make. Your opinions should not be part of the news feature. You should let the experts tell the story from their point of view through quotes. You are there to let readers draw their own conclusions about the information you present.