Human interest

You will rarely find enough hard news on your installation to fill your weekly publication. Therefore, most of the stories you write in your careers will be feature stories. Though many feature stories are based on or inspired by news events, the human-interest feature is truly a “story about anything,” as long as it is appropriate and has a military tie.

As with all features, human-interest features are meant to entertain and inform your readers. Often you will see these features used to tell the story behind the story about an event, organization and an individual. They are used as a tool to raise morale – which, in the end, allows military members to perform more effectively.
Definition and purpose

The purpose of human-interest features is to entertain, inform and engage your readership. Human-interest is a very broad feature category. Basically, any feature topic that can interest people is considered a form of human-interest feature.

Human-interest features are considered “timeless” in that they can be published weeks after the story is written. In some cases, you may want to touch base with your sources to ensure none of the facts in the story have changed. Your ability to weave an entertaining and informative story together to gain and maintain reader interest replaces the news peg of a hard news story.

Human-interest features can be found anywhere. Topics are confined only to the writer’s ability to find them.

Examples:

- A mission feature on maintainers who work on carrier flight decks.
- A story about family members who cope with back-to-back deployments.
- Military programs that help wounded military members reintegrate into the community.
- Security forces personnel who keep the peace on base during after-duty hours and holidays.
- Firefighters who conduct “trial by fire” training.

Now that we’ve discussed the purpose of human-interest features, let’s discuss the information-gathering process.
Gathering information

Journalists primarily gather information in three ways: interviews, observation and research. Remember, curiosity and interest must guide journalists to find out as much as they can for feature stories. If you can satisfy your own curiosity, chances are you will also fulfill the readers’ curiosity.

**Interviews** -- The main way to gather information is to interview the subject-matter experts. As you gather the material for your feature, remember your focus. Ask questions and get information that relates directly to that focus. Design questions to get information needed to write the story.

- Write as many questions as possible, keeping your audience in mind.
- All questions should support, reinforce story focus.
- Use follow-up questioning techniques.
- Consider using an audio recording device to supplement detailed note-taking.
- Get interviewee’s contact information and ask to come back if you need more information.

**Observation** -- Writers, especially newspaper reporters, must learn to “see beyond” what most people see in a person, at a scene, or during an event. They must condition themselves to notice and record everything they can.

There still must be a point to the story. A feature story constructed entirely of observations is doomed to fail because readers can sense nothing in it for them. It’s just the writer’s observations. But observations of mannerisms and physical descriptions can add depth and humanity to a feature story.

Interviewers can satisfy their curiosity by asking interviewees to clarify or elaborate certain points. However, when a writer has to gather the information by research and/or observation, the onus to clarify or elaborate falls to the writer.

When the information has been gathered and the story is ready to be written, what is said and how it is said can make the difference between a good and a mediocre feature – especially in terms of editorializing.

There often is a fine line between observation and editorializing. For example: If you write, “Davis thoroughly enjoys teaching at the Defense Information School,” that is editorializing.
How do you know Davis enjoyed teaching? However, if you write, “Davis smiled as he recalled some of his teaching experiences at the Defense Information School,” you have implied he enjoyed teaching by observing him smiling before recalling some teaching experiences. You can also back up claims with facts. This will help substantiate a subject’s claim.

**Research** -- A military feature story based entirely on research is doomed to fail, because there is no human element to portray. But research, combined with observation and interviews, can provide a complete package. Research provides additional factual information to either support or refute claims by the subject. Research can also provide little nuggets of information that leave readers saying, “Wow! I didn’t know that!”

After you have gathered information for your feature, you can now assess that information to help you determine your story structure.
Story structure

The way the content and events of a story are organized. The most common structures you can use to write a good human-interest feature story are:

- Chronological structure – tells the story from the beginning to its end in time order. It is usually easiest to write and understand.

- General to specific or least to most important structure – a good structure to use when writing stories that are technical, complicated or have a broad view and narrows down to a specific point. It is the opposite of the inverted pyramid approach.

- Topical or functional structure – breaks the story down into topics or functions. The writer then explains how each of these topics or functions relates to the story’s focus.

- Combination structure – uses two or more of these structures together to make the story work. The keys to remember are story flow and reader understanding.

Story structure is the basic template that shapes the order of information in a feature story. Now let’s discuss the “nuts and bolts” of a feature in the writing process.
The writing process

News stories must tell themselves. The facts are the backbone of the story. In features, the writer must develop stories to interest readers; writers tell a story in features. When writing feature stories, students should remember to use:

- Appropriate tone to match story – a serious feature should have a serious tone. A light-hearted feature should have a light-hearted tone.

- Creative writing techniques – metaphors, hyperbole, alliteration and other techniques should be used when appropriate in feature stories.

- Scene-setting – setting a scene through creative writing is often a very effective technique to draw readers into your story.

- Description and observation – use all your senses during the information-gathering process and use your observations to add "spice" to your features.

- Strong conclusions – a feature story without an effective conclusion is like a joke without a punch line. The conclusion is the writer’s last opportunity to drive home the point of the story.

Even when writers start with good ideas and gather good information, the success of the human-interest feature depends on how well the story is told. All the basics of good feature writing apply – style, tone, flow, structure, focus, strong leads, and logical organization.

- Remember accuracy above all else. Your feature stories cannot be fabricated or contrived.

- Assume the reader understands very little about the subject.

- Avoid editorializing by supporting what you say with facts and observation.

Lead -- The lead needs to be strong and draw the reader into the story. It must be appropriate for the story in style and content. Remember the five types of feature leads: summary, narrative, descriptive, anecdotal and combination.

Use the type of lead that best matches the tone, style and focus of the story.

Example lead:

He shouts and stomps around like someone just kicked his dog or whispered a few choice words about his mother. He gets in your face and barks orders like you’re 100 yards away. Something must have provoked such anger, or maybe that’s just how an Army drill sergeant is.

Transition paragraphs -- Transition paragraphs allow the writer to expand upon the lead, continue setting the scene, add relevance to a teaser lead, or otherwise transition from the lead to the nutgraph. These are optional, but act as a bridge to the nutgraph. Transition paragraphs also emphasize the focus of the story and expand and build on lead.
**Nutgraph** – The nutgraph of a feature story explains the purpose or point of the story “in a nutshell.” The focus (the angle you have chosen for your story) should be clearly presented in the nutgraph.

The nutgraph, although it can be nearly anywhere in the story, can be compared to the bridge of a news story in that it provides information essential to understanding what the story is about. The bridge reinforces the news peg. The nutgraph reinforces the focus of the feature.

Example Transition/Nutgraph:

**Transition paragraphs:**

*But there’s a reason drill sergeants here are so tough on their soldiers.*

“Ironically, it’s because we care,” said Staff Sgt. Morty Q. Beck, a drill sergeant at the U.S. Army Signal School Detachment Student Company here.

**Nutgraph:**

*Getting student-soldiers prepared for the stress, pressure and demands of combat drive the drill sergeants to be tough but caring with those in their charge.*

**Body** -- The body should be organized based on the type of structure being used, paying particular attention to transitions. Transitions are the outline of the story, moving the reader smoothly from one paragraph to the next. Transition words are those that signal a change and tell what that change will be. Some transitional words include therefore, however, still, furthermore, but and although.

**Conclusions** -- Conclusions bring the reader “full circle” to a logical end of the story and a feeling of completeness. Ask yourself what emotion do you want to elicit from your reader, and use one of the types of endings presented in this course to fit the bill.

Example conclusion:

*Behind the “Army-Strong” exteriors, disguised by sneers and shouting, lie leaders of soldiers. Motivated by compassion and a sense of duty, the drill sergeants at the Army detachment prepare their warriors for the demands of combat with strong hands and gentle hearts.*
Conclusion

When you find it hard to find a story for your weekly publication, remember the human-interest feature. These versatile features can tell the story behind the story about a news event, an organization or even an individual. The human-interest feature is truly a “story about anything,” as long as it is appropriate and has a military tie.

The human-interest features are meant to entertain and inform readers. They are used as a tool to raise morale – which, in the end, allows military members to perform more effectively.
References


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