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## WRITING/EDITING

Centerpiece

### Reviving the Feature Story

By [Roy Peter Clark](#) ([more by author](#))  
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In my [recent essay](#) about the Feature Writing category of the Pulitzer Prizes, I argued that weighty narrative series may have elbowed the traditional stand-alone feature out of contention. As a champion and practitioner of the serial narrative, I mean no disrespect for the work of my journalism heroes such as Isabel Wilkerson, Tom French, Tom Hallman, Anne Hull, Jacqui Banaszynski, and many others.

But the future of the feature story is important. ([The Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing](#) is important only because it declares a standard of excellence to which other journalists aspire.) Readers like stories, even news stories, written in "feature style," [according to the Readership Institute](#). And since the invention of the human-interest story, the feature has had the beneficial effect of expanding the universe of newspaper readers while enriching our definition of news.

Feature stories offer news of the emotions is the way Jon Franklin, twice a Pulitzer winner, has described it to me.

What, then, does a real feature story look like?

Consider these as possible characteristics:

1. You can read it, if you want to, in a single sitting on the day the story was published.
2. You can read a short one in five minutes and a long one in 15 minutes.
3. It is NOT a news story but can be inspired by the news.
4. It has, at its heart, human interest.
5. It illuminates lives lived in our time.
6. It takes advantage of an expanded set of language and narrative strategies.
7. It can be written and reported within the normal timeframe of journalistic enterprise.

Each one of those characteristics deserves its own essay. But for now, I'll offer a couple of recent examples of the noble feature

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story from my hometown newspaper, the *St. Petersburg Times*.

Lane DeGregory wrote "[Fight, Fight, FIGHT](#)," the story of a male high school cheerleader, kicked off the squad for drinking. His assertive mother seems ready to go to the ends of the earth to clear her son's name. I happened to like this story very much, but it's not necessary for you to like it in order to recognize it as an exemplar of the newspaper feature genre.

Applying my standards:

- The entire story appeared in the *St. Pete Times* on Sunday, May 30, 2004, and I read it in one sitting.
- It took me about 15 minutes to read the story, which was about 60 inches long, at the far end of my standard, but still in range. (Lane says she drafted a version that was twice as long, cut it herself, and then cut it again with the help of her editor.)
- It is not a news story, although the mother's legal suit against the school board had been reported as news.
- The human characters are fascinating, a teenager who becomes the only boy on the cheerleading squad, only to lose his position for allegations of drinking; a mother unwilling to let this stand, whose efforts to rescue her son may have backfired.
- The story is "about" so many of the issues of our time: gender politics, sexual orientation, discrimination, litigious parents, inflexible school boards, mother and child reunions, and much, much more.
- The story is written in a compelling and non-judgmental voice that lets readers enter the world of this family, experience the turmoil, and draw their own conclusions. Here's the lead:

Johnathan's mom drove him to cheerleading camp that Wednesday.

She helped carry his bags to his dorm room at the University of South Florida, where he was going to spend three days with his teammates from Pasco High. She hung his Tommy Hilfiger shirts in the closet. She made his bed.

Then she drained the melted ice from his cooler. She had packed it with nectarines and peaches, whole milk and Zephyrhills water, two bottles of Gatorade and a six-pack of Sierra Mist. She knows these details because she went back to Wal-Mart months later and got a copy of the receipt.

She needed it for evidence.

These details foreshadow the mother's more controlling impulses, and the mini-cliffhanger drives the reader forward to answer the

### [Hiding the Paper](#)

By Kelly McBride

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question: "evidence for what?"

Lane says she reported and wrote the story from March through May, a period during which she worked on another half-dozen or so feature stories.

I can make a similar case for "[Sean's Echo](#)," a story written by Kelley Benham. Here we learn of a young boy who dies suddenly of natural causes, leaving behind a special hearing device that helped him overcome his serious speech impediment.

Former Poynter boss, Jim Naughton, told me that he cried during the poignant scenes in which another young boy becomes the beneficiary of this expensive mechanical device, which cures his stuttering.

At first the story looks like the familiar one in which a person benefits from a transplanted organ. What makes this case special is that the "organ" is a mechanical device.



Matt Thompson/Poynter

Kelley's story was about a 10-minute read (2,000 words) and fit into many of the standard feature writing categories I described above.

To show her range and versatility, that same week Kelley wrote a [story](#) about a homeowner who loves his lawn and his \$17,000 lawnmower just a little too much. "One day she made me cry," testified Naughton, "another day she made me laugh."

"Feature Writing" will always be an imprecise mode of expression, with an imprecise history. The book "[Best News Stories of 1924](#)" compiled stories in several categories, including Feature Stories, Human Interest Stories, Interviews, and Personality Stories. Most of these stories, from the vantage point of our time, look like features.

One additional complicating factor: In the last 30 years, my time frame, news stories have been written with more feature elements, and many features are written right off the news. So the lines between news and features have blurred.

In that same time period, many newspapers have dropped their Sunday magazines and converted their general feature sections to cover special topics, everything from food to health to technology. As a result, the habitat for the traditional stand-alone feature has shrunk, and, with it, the habit of reading good stories that used to draw many of us to the newspaper in the first place.

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