

NOTES PREPARE BY ALEMKENG RICHARD

INTRODUCTION TO FEATURE WRITING

0 Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

You must have read features times without number without an understanding of what exactly you read. How do I know this? If you answer yes to majority of these questions, the chances are high that you have read features before. Have you gone through a magazine before? Have you read stories beyond the center page of a newspaper before? Have you read about a prominent Cameroonian in a magazine or the newspaper and you enjoyed it? Have you read about places and felt like being there to witness what the writer described? If you answered yes on two or three occasions, then you have come across a feature story before. The question now is what is a feature? What are the characteristics of a feature story? Is there any difference between a feature in a newspaper and a feature in a magazine? What are the types of features we have? What are the qualities a good feature writer must possess? These questions have been dutifully answered in this module.

What is Feature Writing?

According to Alexander (2000:2), feature writing is writing and reporting, which answers the questions: What was it like? and/or “what does it mean?” A feature story provides a reader with the flavor of an event or the nature of a person, not just the facts of what happened or to whom it happened. It carries its reader beyond the events and leads him to an understanding of them. Gideon (2009:14) defines feature writing as vivid, sensational writing which appeals to the emotions of the reader.

Alexander (2003:1), further gives his definition more understanding by stating that feature writing is writing an arresting story about a bank robbery and a sympathetic story about a campaign to raise money for welfare agencies. It is giving a reader an insight into how a young girl feels when, suddenly, she realizes she has been selected as Miss MTN or Miss Cameroon or Miss tourism. It is telling a reader more about a hurricane than just the fact that 6.3 inches of rain fell within 24 hours and 5000 phones were knocked out of order by the rain and by winds that rose to 125 miles an hour. According to Okoye (2006:10), feature is an in-depth and factual write up on a topical issue which seeks to give comprehensive information in a more captivating and relaxed style than the straight news.

Feature writing is an attempt to report, inform, enlighten, educate or persuade in a relaxed way. Whether it is a serious news or just an article, what feature articles or writings seek to achieve is to pass the message across to the divergent or specific readers in a more expansive, illustrative, sensational, descriptive or dramatic way. This is achieved through feature writing devices like quotes, specific details, personality, interesting writing etc.

CHARACTERISTICS OF FEATURE

Wheeler (2009:3) gives the following characteristics of features; 20

1. Varied Approach: There is no one correct way to structure a feature. There are many ways to it. This greatly depends on the skill of the writer and how he can drive his point across to the readers.
2. Individual voice from the writer- A good feature writer will develop his own distinctive writing style. It may be amusing, serious or sarcastic for example.
3. Can involve Personal thoughts, colors, description- The journalist may become part of the feature if they try out a new sport or want to draw attention to an interviewee's strange behavior. They can describe a big event, and comment on what they see.
4. Longer than news- Features have room enough to breath. Some of the features in magazines or weekend newspaper supplements may run to several thousand words.
5. Involve narrative background- there is far more space in a feature for the journalist to ink in background information; in a news story this may be restricted to one or two brief paragraphs.
6. Wide use of quotes and dialogue- News stories will, of course, include quotes, but there are usually fewer of them. A feature writer has the luxury of more space for quotes, and even including snatches of dialogue where two or more people may be talking.

7. May have a more distant deadline- News stories are generally written with a tight deadline. Features however may be prepared a day or more in advance, magazine deadlines may be three months.

SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2

I want you to go through the characteristics of feature writing again. Now, do that quickly. Ok, close this book, take a sheet of paper and enlist four characteristics of a feature.

A feature can appear either in a newspaper or in a magazine. It is important to let you know that there is no difference between the feature you will find in a newspaper and the one you will find in a magazine. In fact, most magazine features are essentially like newspaper features. Yet, there are some silent and sensitive differences between magazine writing and newspaper writing.

The differences are as follows;

1. Specialization: A magazine appeals to a special community of readers; oil men, students, fashion designers, sport enthusiasts, Christians, Muslimsetc., while a newspaper appeals to a cross section, whose only common interest is their geographic location in the same city. Alexander (2003:240). A feature writer should however know this to avoid lack of focus. Because if you are writing for a magazine that has children as the readers and your language could not meet their needs, then you have not achieved much.

2. Thoroughness: Another major difference is the thorough nature of the magazine article. Many newspaper articles are thorough; but a writer cannot wait for events to climax or to terminate, he reports whatever happens up to the newspaper deadline. A magazine comes out monthly; there is time to get thorough coverage. Magazines encourage good writing. Not that newspaper don't but two things militate against good writing in newspapers, and they are the speed with which a writer must put together his story and the limited amount of space the newspaper can devote to each topic. In spite of that, many newspaper stories are extremely well written. Magazines have deadline that encourage good writing. There's a month between issues. Magazine stories run longer, in general, than those in newspapers. They are long enough to include everything that belongs in the story and there is enough time to decide what to omit.

TYPES OF FEATURE

Okoye (1998:37) in Omojuyigbe (2005:107) identifies six major kinds of feature as;

1. The News Feature
2. The Profile

3. The Expose or Alarmer
4. The Travelogue
5. How-to-do-it yourself
6. Review of work of Art.

According to Omojuyigbe (2005:107), out of the six features outlined above, an editor can allow a contributor to handle only profile, travelogue, and how-to-do-it yourself and review of a work of art. He may not allow him to dabble in the area of news feature and alarmed if the editor must hold his peace. This is because news feature is an expanded version of news report and an alarmer is a story exposing the ills of society. An editor would prefer any of his regular hands to do either story than to allow a contributor do it.

FUNCTIONS OF FEATURE

According to Okoye (2006:14), while straight news breaks the news of the day, feature helps the reader to understand better what has happened. Feature is able to do this through in-depth analysis, interpretation, explanation and focusing on the aspects usually ignored by straight news.

Secondly, feature summarizes the big news of the week. Because feature is more comprehensive than straight news, it has the tendency to gather the bits of news that broke during the week and summarize them in one piece.

Thirdly, feature has the advantage of dealing with areas not usually covered or under covered by straight news. According to Okoye (2006:14), trivialities and mundane things of life which make interesting reading are the subjects of good features. Most times, the concern of the feature writer may be the human interest and their involvement in trivialities or just to make a news out of these trivialities.

Some examples of these trivialities could be;

- Meet the poorest Beamlike Man
- Meet the first Professor of Kong Fu.

Again, feature articles provide enough materials for those who read for pleasure. Because feature writing is usually written in a colorful and stylish manner than straight news, its content usually appeal more to the pleasure reading public who are usually bored by the formal nature of straight news.

QUALITIES OF A GOOD FEATURE WRITER

Okoye (2004:15), captures four essential qualities of a good feature writer but he cautions that first a good feature writer must be a good news

writer. He must possess the traditional qualifications for basic journalistic practice, plus an analytical and creative mind slightly higher than that required for writing straight news. The qualities are;

1. A nose for news- A good journalist must have nose for news. Having nose for news have many dimensions to it. This range from the ability to recognize that a particular information can be made of interest to readers, viewers or listeners. It is also the ability to recognize clues in the environment or a beat which may be very casual but which may lead to the discovery of important news. Also, it is ability to recognize the possibility of several other news related to the particular information at hand. 23

2. Resourcefulness: A good feature writer is resourceful. By resourcefulness, I mean he is good at finding ways of improving himself and improving the quality of his writing. A resourceful featurewriter consistently solvesproblems arising or that may arise from the beat.

3. Sound Educational and Professional background: A good feature writer must have gone to the University or Polytechnic to acquire a degree in Journalism or mass communication. Though, over the years, graduates of English, Philosophy, Education, Theatre Arts etc. have shown incredible penchant for the journalism practice, it is not important to stress that those who are schooled in journalism often times stand out and need not be re-schooled vigorously for the basics in the profession. In Nigeria, there are different kinds of education for a journalist. They are the University/Polytechnic training and In-house training.

4. Love for Writing: A good feature writer must unavoidably love the art of writing. A feature writer must be such a person that enjoys the pains that go with the process of writing from planning to the final draft. Also, he must be someone who is not satisfied with even the final draft until it is taking to the press.

SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 3

Do you think a feature in a magazine is the same as a feature in a newspaper? Justify your claims in two paragraphs.

6.0 TUTOR MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Submit a two-page essay (A4, double spacing) where you spell with detailed explanations the qualities of a good feature writer.

7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READINGS

Okoye, I. (2006) Feature Writing; Theory and Practice (2nd ed) Lagos. Malthouse Press Limited.