How to Write a Profile Feature Article

As a student journalist, your mission is to inform your peers. Your fellow students look to your work to help them understand the nuances of the environments they inhabit, and to accurately represent their experiences and views. Here are a few guidelines that should help you report and write for the national audience you will have if your submission is selected for publication on The New York Times Learning Network.

1. Know the rules of attribution. You must identify yourself as a reporter before beginning any conversation with a source. If you don't, his or her comments will not be considered "on the record" -- and therefore they will not be useable in your article. A source cannot retroactively take his or her comments "off the record" -- so if a source says at the end of an interview, "but that was all off the record," that person is out of luck.

2. Ask open questions, be a good listener, and probe for anecdotes. Get a source talking by asking questions that begin with "how" or "why." Once a source starts talking, try to keep him or her going by asking follow-up questions like, "What do you mean by that?" or "Can you give me an example?"

3. Prepare for your interviews. Come to any interview armed with a basic list of questions you hope to ask. If the conversation goes well you can (and should) toss your questions and go with the flow, but if you have a terse source your questions should be a big help in keeping the conversation going. When interviewing leaders and experts, you should always have a basic understanding of the work they have done which has prompted you to look to those people as sources.

4. Interview with breadth and depth. Interview as wide a range of people as possible, and probe them for thoughtful answers. You don't need to use quotes from every person you interview -- but having a diverse collection of interviews in your notebook will give you the best possible selection of quotes. Plus, good interviews should help you expand your understanding of your topic.

5. Write for a national audience. Obviously, your story will be grounded by your familiarity with your own school. But you should seek a variety of perspectives and several expert opinions. Try to interview students from at least three different schools,

and look for recent research studies that may help illuminate some of the points your article makes. Interview the authors of the studies if you can.

6. Keep an open mind. Don't assume that you understand all the nuances of your topic. Expect that your understanding will evolve as you report. If it doesn't, you may not have reported thoroughly or aggressively enough.

Once you're ready to write:

7. Decide on an approach. Outlining your story is the best way to start. This means reviewing your notes, marking the most interesting or articulate quotes, making a list of important points, and creating a structure into which you can fit your information. Spend extra time of the beginning of your story. Readers will decide whether to proceed based on the capacity of your lede to grab their interest.

8. Focus on what's most compelling. Before you start writing, think through all the information you have and all the points you plan to make. What's surprising? What's important? What's useful?

9. Show, don't tell. It is tempting to describe a room as messy or a person as nice. But carefully-observed details and well-chosen verbs make a much stronger impression than adjectives.

10. Put your story in context. You must help answer a reader's biggest question about any story: Why should I care?

11. Don't overuse direct quotes. Sometimes you can best capture a mood with your own prose. Think of direct quotes as icing on a cake -- they enhance, but they shouldn't form the substance of your story. The quotes you do use must be attributed, always. The reader should not have to guess who is talking.

12. Fill holes. Are there questions raised by your story that you have not answered? Ask a friend, teacher, editor or fellow reporter to read through your story and tell you what else he or she would want to know.

13. Triple-check for accuracy. Spell names right. Get grade levels and titles right. Get facts right. If you are unsure of something and cannot verify it, leave it out. Before you turn in your story, ask yourself these questions: Have I attributed or documented all my facts? Are the quotes in my story presented fairly and in context? Am I prepared to publicly defend my facts if they are questioned?

14. Proofread. Do not turn in a story with spelling or grammatical mistakes. If you're not sure of grammar, consult a copy of Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, or read it online at http://www.columbia.edu/acis/bartleby/strunk

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A "profile feature" is a newspaper article that explores the background and character of a particular person (or group). The focus should be on a news angle or a single aspect of the subject's personal or professional life. The article should begin with the reason the subject is newsworthy at this time, and should be based (not exclusively) on an extensive interview with the subject.

Biographical material is important, but should not be overemphasized: the biography is background to the news. Readers should be allowed to better understand the subject by seeing this person in the context of his or her interests and career, educational and family background.

When reporting a profile feature article, observe your surroundings carefully. Pay attention to your subject's habits and mannerisms. Subtle clues like posture, tone of voice and word choice can all, when presented to readers, contribute to a fuller and more accurate presentation of the interview subject.

When interviewing, encourage your subject to open up and express significant thoughts, feelings or opinions. Do so by asking open-ended questions that are well-planned. Make sure to research the subject of your profile before beginning your interview. This will help you to maintain focus during the conversation and to ask questions that will elicit compelling responses.

The article should open with the subject's connection to the news event and should deal later with birth, family, education, career and hobbies, unless one of those happens to be the focus of the story.

Interview at least five other people, representing a variety of perspectives, about the subject of your profile. Ask them for telling anecdotes. You don't have to quote, or even mention, all of these people in your article. But each may provide you with information that will help you ask better questions of your profile subject, or of the next person you interview.

Make a list of people you would like to interview for your article. Contact them early, and often. If sources you think would be useful don't return your calls or notes, be

politely persistent. Ask again, always explaining who you are, the topic of your article, and why you think they would be helpful. If they won't talk to you, ask them to refer you to others who might.

Profile features should include the major elements of hard news stories, but should also provide readers with details help to capture the essence of the person you are profiling. Contextual information should clearly show readers why the profile subject you have chosen is relevant and interesting.

Since features are typically reported and written over a much longer period of time than event-driven news, they should be carefully researched and supported with as much background material as possible. Check the library, the Internet and experts for previous news coverage and references to key information.

Profile feature ledes are often more creative than news leads. They don't always need to contain the standard "five w's (and h)": who, what, when, where, why and how. (These elements should, however, be aggregated somewhere in your article in what has come to be known as a "nut graf," the paragraph that clearly explains to readers who your profile is about and why this person is interesting.) A profile feature lede can take one of many forms. One is a "delayed lede," in which a person is introduced before his or her relevance is revealed. An example:

As a young girl growing up on the South Side of Chicago, Mae C. Jemison watched telecasts of the Gemini and Apollo spaceflights and knew that that was her destiny. No matter that all the astronauts were male and white and that she was female and black. She simply knew she would be a space traveler.

Now a 35-year-old doctor and engineer, Dr. Jemison has realized her dream, launching into orbit yesterday as one of the shuttle Endeavor's sever-member crew. In the process she has become the first African-American woman to go into space. ...

When structuring your story, don't feel tied to the "inverted pyramid" style of writing, in which the most important information is placed in the first paragraph and proceeds retrogressively from there. Consider weaving background material with details and quotes, and when choosing an order in which to present your information, move thematically rather than chronologically.

Don't end your article with a conclusion. Consider saving a particularly resonant quote for the last sentence. This way your article will end with a voice the reader may be left hearing long after he or she has finished your story.

Source: https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/learning/students/writing/voices.html