

ANNOTATING FEATURE STORIES

This is another Pulitzer Prize winning feature story. News stories report events in a very straight forward fashion. Features, on the other hand, are colorful. They paint a picture of a person, place or thing. Feature stories use more vivid language and in doing so make you feel as if you actually know the person, can actually see the person, and it picks you up and takes you to the place. Using language that will do this is an art form. Today, I just want you to look for a few of the items that create color in a feature story..

1. **READ THE ENTIRE STORY THROUGH ONCE before marking anything in it. After you are done, then go ahead and start annotating for the following items:**

2. The lead of a feature must ***grab the reader by the lapels and hurl him into the story***. The reader must be committed to reading the piece by the power of the first sentence. **Underline the first sentence and notate in the margin if it is powerful or not.**

Try to decide what you think is the lead (the hook). Feature articles usually begin with a ***delayed lead*** - an anecdotal or descriptive lead. Instead of the who-did-what-and-when of hard news, a feature often begins with one or two or three short paragraphs to set the scene. The **lead may be several paragraphs that tease the reader** but it will always end with what is called the ***“nut graf”*** which is one or more paragraphs that explains the news value of the story. This nut graf must explain the opening anecdote and put it in a broader context. It hints to the reader what the feature article is about.

Bracket the lead all the way to the end of the nut graf. Indicate in the margin if you think this is an ***anecdotal*** (tells a brief story) or a ***descriptive*** lead (describes a person, place or thing). (there are many other types of leads, but these are the two major types.

Circle the nut graf. In the margin make a few notes on why you think this is the nut graf.

3. Words are a writer’s craft. A writer is a writer because he/she can use words better than others. A feature story uses **colorful language....vivid, active, specific verbs** (‘the fireman ***sloshed*** through the water’ as opposed to ‘the fireman ***walked*** through the water’) and **concrete specific nouns** (***dachshund*** as opposed to ***dog***).

Go through the story and **underline vivid verbs and mark V.V. in the margin and underline specific concrete nouns and label CN in the margin.**

4. Now go through the story and **underline any wording** (groups of words or single words) **you find particularly colorful** (picture painting) **and write CL in the margin for colorful language.**

You may also just find words / wording that you feel is especially good. Underline and write ‘*gwc*’ by it.

5. Thomas Wolfe, the father of **New Journalism** (which is the **practice of incorporating the creative writer’s techniques into journalism**) invented a term called ***‘status details’***. They can also be called ***telling details***. These are very small details that tell you a lot about something. (Sometimes they can be brand names. Someone who carries a Channel handbag might seem quite a different person than one who carries a Bongo bag).

Go through the story and underline any small but very telling details and write TD in the margin.

6. In all journalism, but especially in feature writing, ***quotes must be worthy of a spotlight*** otherwise don’t use them....just paraphrase the info and quote it indirectly. Think of those **quotation marks as SPOTLIGHTS**. Go through the story and **underline all direct quotations and in the margin indicate if you think it is worthy of a spotlight by putting SL.**

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7. **The ending of a feature story must be just as powerful as the beginning (the lead).** In fact, most journalists will write the lead and the ending first...before the body of the story. There is much more to learn about leads and endings but first, *did he writer take as long to get out of the piece (ending) as he did to get into it (ending)?*

Bracket the ending (it may be several paragraphs) **and in the margin indicate if the ending was long enough to equal the lead.** The ending often (and usually should) ties back in some way to the lead (*Wall Street Journal Formula*). **Indicate in the margin by the ending if it did tie back to the lead and indicate briefly how it achieved this.**

Another technique is that the ending is usually written in the same writing style as the lead (ex.: narrative, descriptive, anecdote, etc) **Indicate in the margin by the lead what writing style used in the ending and whether or not it was the same style as the author used in the lead.**

One rule (of mine) is the final sentence (denouement) must leave the reader immobilized (unable to move) like after you read the last line in a very special book or at the end of a movie you were really affected by...you just sit there. **Underline the denouement (final sentence) of this story.** If you find it powerful write **IMMOB** in the margin.

8. Now go back through the story and look at the beginning of each paragraph. **Underline any transition words used to tie the paragraph to the one before it and DRAW an arrow to the part of the previous paragraph that it “transishes” (not a word.....) to.** It may be just as simple as repetition of a key word, or use of a synonym. It doesn't always have to be a “*transition word*”.

9. Look at each paragraph and check out the length of the sentences. Short sentences are used to create tension in the reader. Longer sentences are used to relax the reader. **Bracket any area in the story (if any) where there are a series of shorter sentences used. Make a note in the margin if and how you believe this was done to create tension.**

Ideally, journalists should vary their sentence lengths within a paragraph since journalistic paragraphs are so few in words (around 40). You need **short sentences surrounded by longer ones or vice versa to give your writing rhythm.** (We can achieve this by *sentence combining*.) Roy Peter Clark of the Poynter Institute, one of the most prestigious schools for journalists in the world, illustrates this concept of vary rhythm through sentence length very simply with the words to a children's' song.

Part one is a simple musical phrase repeated once

Three blind mice, three blind mice

Part 2 is about the same length

See how they run, see how they run.

But part 3 adds more complex phrases:

**They all ran after the farmer's wife
who cut off their tails with a carving knife
and did you ever see such a thing in your life**

Part 4 returns to the short simple phrase

As three blind mice?

Now, bracket any paragraphs where the author really has varied sentence lengths.

10. Now, on a separate piece of paper, write a short paragraph on whether or not you thought this story was well written and cite your reasons for your position.

EXTRA CREDIT: Refer back to # 5 about New Journalism and incorporating creative writing devices into journalism. Think about *alliteration, simile, metaphor, personification, irony, oxymoron, etc.* Mark any kind of literary device you find in the story and indicate the type in the margin.