

Where Do Story Ideas Come From?

h/t Patricia Rodriguez of the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*

Headed from the gym to the locker room after aerobics, I almost tripped over them—a gang of thirty-something men, sprawled in front of my health club’s only HDTV.

What were these workout yuppies watching so attentively? Beavis and Butthead, the MTV cartoon supposedly aimed at metalhead teens. Women walked by the TV as if it didn’t even exist; why did grown men have such an interest in a kids’ show?

This, I decided, was a story.

The feature story my newspaper eventually ran quoted married couples, film historians and local humor experts, explaining the difference between comedies aimed at men and those aimed at women.

OK, so it’s no Pulitzer winner, but it did address a topic people were talking about in my city. In order to produce good, well-read feature stories a staff must find out what people are interested in and write about those topics in an interesting way.

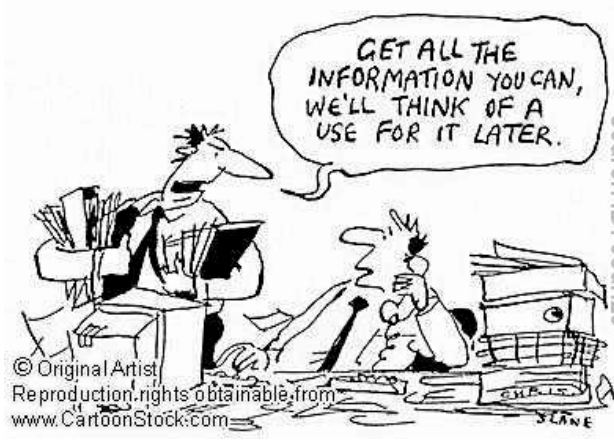
Under that definition, almost everything can be a feature story. Yet in two summers of teaching feature writing, I’ve found that developing story ideas is the most daunting task for beginning writers.

“Where do we get ‘em?” students ask.

There’s no right or wrong way to come up with story ideas, but here are some of my favorites (with edits by Campus Progress):

- Read, read, and then read some more. You can get story ideas from your main student newspaper, from your local paper, or from blogs, listservs and Twitter feeds for residents of your town. You might do a local version of a story in a national magazine. A short local news story might inspire you to write a longer, more detailed feature about the same topic. Some staffs might want to assign different people to read different publications to assure that a wide variety of topics is being covered.
- Pay attention. What are your friends — or, even better, peers you rarely or never talk to — talking and thinking about? What trends, activities and clubs are popular? One of my favorite things about being a reporter is that I can snoop on other people’s conversations and call it research. You can also ask people, both on campus and in your community, what’s new and what they’re reading about.
- Brainstorm. At one publication where I worked, we had weekly meetings where everyone was required to bring at least two story ideas. We would then discuss each idea briefly. The best part of the meeting was that our discussions went off on tangents and that’s where the best ideas often originated.
- Talk to people, and keep your ears open during interviews. Sometimes you’ll hear a stray fact that might be irrelevant to the story you’re working on, but it could lead you to another story altogether. Researching a routine story about a women’s trade show recently, I heard about a new Fort Worth golf league forming strictly for executive women. That ended up being a much bigger and better feature.

- **Change your routine.** Visit a club or town meeting you wouldn't normally attend. Eat lunch in a different spot. Talk to a different group of people. Your job is to cover your whole school, so it's natural to get in a rut after a while. By trying new things, you'll find new stories.
- **Record your ideas.** Make a note in your cell phone (a draft text message, perhaps) when you think of a good story idea but are away from your computer. Keep a document on your computer that compiles all your story possibilities.
- **Formulate a beat.** Try to become an expert in one particular area, and cover it over and over again. Let relevant professors and student leaders know what you're covering, and ask if they have any ideas for stories. Or just get to know them and see whether they mention anything interesting. Follow these people on Twitter.
- **Think.** This isn't as simpleminded as it sounds. You really do have to LEARN to think like a writer. Lots of times, students will tell me interesting things they find out about classmates during the workshop without ever realizing they can write a feature story about it. Without becoming obsessive, you have to learn to treat the whole world as your journalism workshop, always being on the lookout for something interesting or unusual. After all, you never know when you might just trip over a story idea.



Localizing and Focusing Your Topic

h/t Linda Kane, journalism adviser at Naperville Central H.S. in Naperville, IL

News stories must be timely. They focus on informing readers about the who, what, when, where, why and how of an event or other recent occurrence. They often include reactions from affected parties. **Feature stories**, on the other hand, encompass almost everything else: trend stories, follow-ups, arts reviews and more.

The beauty of a feature story is that it screams for creativity and color. And there are countless types of angles to choose from.

Let's take a well-known news item, the push for climate change legislation, and consider the different angles or approaches for a feature story in a campus publication.

Informational feature

A story about local polluters might make an informative article. (See scorecard.org to start your research.) Informational features should focus in on a narrow element, and it's always good if these stories can be made pertinent to your community. Remember: The NYT can talk about Rep. Waxman's latest bill, but your readers hunger for more local information.

Personality sketch (profile)

At this point, everyone who's informed takes the threats of global warming seriously. But does every informed citizen know about the people working to make a difference? Interview and follow an environmental activist on your campus or in your community for several days, and write about what makes him or her tick.

Human interest

What else is changing because of global warming? Interview students to see if anyone has a family member affected by the West Nile Virus, or investigate whether mountain pine beetles have hit your local parks and forests.

Occupational profile

Write a story about the experiences or accomplishments of an environmental science professor at your university, or staff members of local environmental organizations.

In-depth story

Attend an event organized by your campus environmental organization. Then, attend club meetings and interview the president and executive board members about how that event fits into their overall mission of changing the world.

This list isn't even close to exhaustive. You might also consider how-to features on greening your life, or consumer features on environmentally-friendly gear. The main goal: Journalists should always experiment with new angles and reporting opportunities.

Reporting and Writing Tips

h/t Linda Kane, journalism adviser at Naperville Central H.S. in Naperville, IL

Here are some tips to keep in mind as you work to produce great stories:

1. Localize. Always keep in mind that your readers can go elsewhere, and *The New York Times* can cover most national or international stories better than you. But, as college and community journalists, you can still interest readers and provide a fresh angle by taking a major story and localizing it — in other words, by including information relevant to your community alone.
2. Research your subject thoroughly. Be curious, and don't just use others' reporting. Let your journalistic sense guide you to original info that readers can't get elsewhere.
3. Focus your topic. You cannot possibly cover everything. Take broad topics and narrow them; don't be afraid to link or refer to someone else's work if it would provide good background for a reader wanting to know more. But try to differentiate your story from others by taking a fresh angle.
4. Remember that the lead, or introduction, is the most important part of the story. You only have a few seconds to capture your readers' attention. Take, for example, the following lead from a feature story in the *Chicago Tribune*:

Being a clown is more than something to do for David Heffley. It's also a tribute to his gutsy determination to succeed against the odds.

After reading this lead, readers' curiosity would more than likely cause them to keep reading to get the answers.

5. Show, don't tell. This is harder than it sounds, but it's so important. Use vivid verbs, concrete nouns and specific adjectives. Limit adverbs when possible. Appeal to readers' senses by helping them see, hear, taste, feel and smell. Consider similes, metaphors and personification, but use these sparingly.
6. Use direct quotes from as many sources as you can. As a general rule of thumb, many newspaper reporters aim for at least three sources per story.
7. Don't be afraid to use statistics to back up assertions of trends, but don't get bogged down in numbers. Consider conducting your own survey to back up something you notice.
8. Use concise language and avoid GRE words. Showy or academic writing is a bad idea in journalism, since we want to hold readers' attention.
9. If you can, write an effective conclusion, but consider that sometimes the best ending leaves a story hanging. Avoid cheesy, clichéd endings that sound moralistic or preachy. Consider how the *Tribune* writer ended the story that began above, in #4:

"People always told me I was stupid and acted like a clown," he said, "and I've turned it into something good."

10. Revise your first draft often. Even the pros do this: Ernest Hemingway rewrote the last page of *A Farewell to Arms* more than 30 times.
11. Follow a style manual, like the Associated Press or *New York Times* style guides.