

NOW WHAT?

BREATHING NEW LIFE INTO WRITING WITH NARRATIVE STORYTELLING

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A NOTE TO ADVISERS:

By the time they are accepted as staff members, your publication staff should already possess the skills necessary to produce a quality piece of journalism. They've passed the introductory journalism classes and are expected to understand how to conduct an interview and then construct a story, integrating quotes and relevant information. Now what?

For those students who are familiar with journalistic principles and consistently contribute quality pieces to the newspaper, it's time to kick the writing up a notch! Moving away from traditional storytelling techniques and diving deep into a narrative approach will breathe new life into your paper that your readers won't be able to help but notice.

What follows are tips, tools, and techniques for both interviewing and writing

from professionals who know their stuff. They never once praise the inverted pyramid. They scoff at lazy leads. They urge writers to go beyond the ordinary. Implementing some of their best practices will undoubtedly take a so-so feature and turn it into the lunchroom topic of conversation.

FIRST THINGS FIRST:

When you introduce this new idea of narrative storytelling to your staff, they'll probably look at you funny and ask you what you're talking about. Simply put, "narrative" means "telling a story." Though it's most closely associated with fiction writing, it's more than appropriate — and encouraged — for nonfiction writing, especially feature styles suited for most high school newspapers or newsmagazines that are published once or twice a month. In *Telling True Stories*, editor Mark Kramer writes, "In narrative work, characters move through an experience or set of experienc-

es...characters take action over time, and events unfold."

The goal, then, of narrative reporting is to tell readers the story by letting them into an experience. Let them feel like they're eavesdropping on a top-secret conversation. Make them feel like they're sitting in the subject's bedroom. Give them a chance to live the story as you tell it — as you narrate it. So "narrative" is a new way to tell a story.

AND IT ALL STARTS WITH

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THE INTERVIEW

HAVE THREE WEEKS TO WRITE A STORY? Arrange multiple face-to-face interviews or "observation sessions" with your subject. It will add depth and personality to your story. In *Telling True Stories*, David Halberstam writes about the obvious lack of quality in "phonecall stories." Gathering sound bites is important, but the sights, sounds, smells, and feeling of a place are equally so. "I can always tell when a journalist is cheating," he writes.

NARRATIVE ON LOCATION → "Talia Halliday's table rests under stacks of books instead of place settings. The hutch in the corner is a home for art supplies — not fine china. Shelves burst with vintage books, photo albums, and small plastic shelves full of art supplies. Two sewing machines rest on a desk among a clutter of boxes on the floor and paper lanterns hung from the ceiling. Her dining room has become her studio."

LOOK! DON'T JUST LISTEN! Reporters can get in the habit of gluing their eyes to their notebooks, scribbling away furiously, trying to get every single word on paper. That's great — but be sure to keep your eyes as open as your ears. From the moment you walk in the door, use your notebook to record the things you see.

TAKE NOTES on your subject's mannerisms, physical characteristics, surroundings, and interactions with others. Does she twirl her hair when she talks? Does he have four Lennon posters in his room? What kind of clothes is she wearing for her Habitat for Humanity workday?

SPEND TIME observing your subject as a "fly on the wall." In Tim Harrower's book *Inside Reporting*, he writes that observation can lead to the best possible angle for a story. He asks, "What gestures, physical descriptions, or activities will add color to the story — or trigger new questions? The smallest details can make a huge difference, but sometimes we have a tendency to forget those details unless we make a conscious effort to record them. Keep your eyes peeled, and let no detail go undetected."

OBSERVATIONS IN ACTION → "Gathered around oversized stainless steel counters, six women are in the kitchen with her this morning. Two are chopping lettuce for a salad, three are putting the finishing touches on mini Stromboli, and one is washing dishes. Some are in their twenties. Some are middle-aged and older. All in hairnets or bandanas, aprons, and oven mitts, they have more in common now than the abuse they have survived."

USE YOUR SENSES Sight. Smell. Taste. Sound. Touch. All of them have a place in narrative storytelling, but they can't be incorporated unless the reporter is fully aware of his or her surroundings. Vivid descriptions bring your reader into the story, so be sure to take note of even those seemingly minute sensory details. Is your subject playing a certain CD in the background? Did you get a whiff of her perfume when you entered her office? Does he offer you a homemade cookie at your interview? Does the old quilt on the couch have a certain texture? Hear something interesting? Smell something curious? Don't be afraid to ask! Get the name of the perfume. Ask what's cooking. If the cat is meowing, ask what its name is.

SENSES TELLING THE STORY → “She easily goes unnoticed as the smell of freshly fried food steals her customer's attention. Her dark, frizzy hair is forced into a black hat that casts a shadow over her thick eyebrows and kind face. Beneath the harsh fluorescent lighting of the numbered-meal menu overhead, she doesn't even notice herself — the way she deliberately punches the register buttons with one finger, rips the receipt tape in a fluid motion, and slams the drawer closed with purpose. Every. Single. Time.”

DON'T BE SHY If your interview subject was kind enough to let you into his or her office, home, dance studio or church, chances are he or she won't mind if you want to do a little more in-depth reporting. Don't be afraid to request a closer look. Harrower writes, “...Interviewing is a social skill. You must be friendly, but aggressive. Polite, but probing...for many reporters, it's the most fun part of the job.” So have fun! Ask your interview subject to give you a tour. You'll learn more about his or her environment, and more stories will come out. See something interesting? Ask about it! Chances are your subject won't offer detailed information unless you ask a specific question.

CURIOSITY PAYING OFF → “Looking through the dining room hutch, Beverly recalls where she acquired the silver and china that line the shelves — some from Italy, England, and Ireland, some inherited from a great aunt. “We travel a lot and always try to pick up things we can use in the house, not things that just sit there,” she says.”

IF YOU CAN LEARN to focus on the right kinds of information during your interview, your story will practically write itself — or at least give you a little more help than you're used to. As the “narrator” of the story you write, the most important thing is to soak it all in so you can wring it all out for the reader. **BE A SPONGE.**

THE WRITING PROCESS

If you've done what you should during the interview process, then writing your narrative story will come naturally. When all the pieces of the puzzle are on the table, it's easier to see the complete picture — the picture that is yours to create with a narrative approach. Of course, every good story undergoes multiple rewrites, so your first narrative story isn't just going to materialize overnight. It takes time and practice, and with these methods, you'll be well equipped for writing an engaging story like you never have before.

START WITH A BANG!

The lead sets the tone for your entire story. When crafting a lead, think about the thread you want to weave from beginning to middle to end, as though you were making up a plot for fictional characters. Use your lead to entice your readers and keep them wanting more.

AVOID USING DIRECT QUOTES IN LEADS, and NEVER start a lead with a question. Using a quote — unless it is a knockout quote or piece of relevant dialogue (we'll discuss that later) — means the reporter was too lazy to craft his or her own original paragraph. Asking a question is just hokey.

INCLUDE DESCRIPTION of your subject in action right off the bat. This is your opportunity to decide the starting point of your narrative. Say your story is about a student who volunteered on Thanksgiving:

THUMBS DOWN → “Ashley Jamison spent her time serving food at the local homeless shelter this Thanksgiving.”

THUMBS UP → “With an ice cream scoop, she fills a corner of a Styrofoam plate with mashed potatoes and hands it to the first bearded man in line.

Harrower writes that narrative leads are like movies that “drop you right into the action.” He's right! Narrative leads are the beginning of a movie, and it's your job to keep that momentum going until the end credits roll.

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NARRATIVE WRITING (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5)

KEEP THE MOMENTUM

The narrative can't stop at the lead! That's just the beginning. By periodically returning to the action you introduced in your lead, the reader isn't left hanging, wondering why you suddenly shifted gears after your narrative opening.

RETURN TO THE "SCENE" YOU SET UP. For example, in the story about the student volunteering on Thanksgiving, let's say that it opens with a narrative lead then introduces some key information about the student for a paragraph or two.

NOW IT'S TIME TO CUT BACK TO YOUR NARRATIVE. Is she helping a new homeless guest now? Would it be fitting to describe her apron or the interaction she has with fellow volunteers? Did you overhear any dialogue between your subject and one of the homeless guests?

DON'T OVER DO IT! You want to "sprinkle" the narrative throughout your story or imagine it as a thread that weaves in and out at different times. Overkill will turn your reader off, but the right balance of "show" and "tell" will lead the reader safely through your story from beginning to end.

THE "NUT GRAF"

"Nut graf" is a term you'll hear being used by professional writers all over. In his book *Reporting and Writing: Basics for the 21st Century*, Chip Scanlan writes about the purpose of a nut graf: "The nut graf tells the reader what the writer is up to; it delivers a promise of the story's content and message. It's called the nut graf because, like a nut, it contains the kernel, or essential theme, of the story."

NUT GRAFS ARE MEANT TO BE PAIRED WITH NARRATIVE LEADS. The lead is the first paragraph, and the nut graf (typically) directly follows. Harrower writes that the nut graf "condenses the story into a nutshell...And it's vital. Without a nut graf, impatient readers may wonder What's the point? and drift away, no matter how clever your lead is."

A NUT GRAF IS INFORMATION-DRIVEN. It answers the Who? When? Where? How? questions — though it doesn't need to give everything away in one little paragraph. More information can reveal itself throughout.

NARRATIVE LEAD → "Operating her wooden spinning wheel, Pam Kinnaman gently pulls a clump of white fleece with an effortless technique as she watches it transform into yarn. Just outside, a pasture and barn are home to her very own flock of sheep and camelids — llamas and alpacas — whose names and personalities she knows like those of her own children. On her Bloomfield, Ind., farm, with her husband, Tim, and a host of fiber-bearing animals, Pam is living out her dream.

NUT GRAF → Eleven years ago, the Kinnamans purchased the farm that they found online. Midwest transplants from Florida, Pam began populating the farm with sheep just a couple years later. She started to accumulate camelids more recently and says she'd like to have more. "I'm going crazy," she says about her acquisition of llamas and alpacas. "I just can't stop. It's an addiction."

WORDS FROM AN EXPERT



What should students know about going into the narrative writing process with preconceived notions about their subjects?
"You're always surprised. I think it's good to have some ideas or theories, but honestly life confounds our theories, and it's usually much more beautifully complex and messy than our theories. And good reporters are open to that."

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

When using a narrative approach, description is key. One of the most overused (though accurate and still relevant) phrases in journalism is “show, don’t tell.” Although a writer uses words to convey a story, there is still ample opportunity to “show” instead of “tell.” One way to move toward a style of “showing” is to avoid vague language that, despite what your English teacher may have told you, isn’t doing much of anything at all.

ADJECTIVES AND ADVERBS can be a journalist’s worst nightmare. Overusing them makes a description vague and can quickly turn your story into something too elementary for your audience.

THUMBS DOWN → “Lazily he hit the snooze button on his alarm clock. He was tired and sleepily turned over in his bed. He was exhausted and avoided waking up very steadfastly.”

THUMBS UP → “He rolled over with a groan. 7 a.m. had come too early, and with one swift smack to the snooze button on his digital alarm clock, he was back where he wanted to be — under the covers and dreaming.”

Roy Peter Clark writes about adverbs (which can also be applied to adjectives), “Look for weak verb-adverb combinations that you can revise with stronger verbs: “She went quickly down the stairs” can become “She dashed down the stairs.” And “He listened surreptitiously” can become “He eavesdropped.” Give yourself a choice,” he says. In other words: simplifying your language will help drive your narrative story. Keep it clean, crisp, and focused.

WRAP UP LOOSE ENDS

At the end of your story, be sure to return to the scene that has been woven throughout your whole piece. To neglect it at the end would be to leave readers with a cliffhanger ending, which is confusing and frustrating. Take the story about the student who volunteers on Thanksgiving:

THE STORY OPENED with a scene in which the student is scooping mashed potatoes to serve to a bearded homeless man at the local shelter. The end of the story should conclude the scene for the reader. If you put in some good observation time during the interview process, you should have a lot of material to choose from.

CONCLUSION AT WORK → “After almost six hours of serving homeless families, Jamison is told she’s free to go. She unties her apron, splattered with gravy and cranberry sauce, and peels back her hair net, ready to go home.

‘Bye, Miss Ashley!’ one man yells from the far table.

‘Happy Thanksgiving!’ she replies with a wave.”

A STRONG, MEMORABLE QUOTE OR BIT OF DIALOGUE is considered to be one of the best ways to end a feature story. It works when using a narrative approach! Bruce DeSilva of the Associated Press is quoted in Harrower’s *Inside Reporting*. “You should hear (the ending) echoing in your head when you put the paper down,” he says. “It should stay with you and make you think a little bit.” Harrower gives a few more tips on endings, including 1) “Don’t just stop a story because you ran out of material.” 2) “Don’t end stories by summarizing.” 3) “Avoid cute clichés.”



Tom French, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist now on the Indiana University School of Journalism faculty, shares more about his approach to narrative journalism. Go to www.uiowa.edu/~quill-sc/ to read and view a video of Tara Bender’s entire interview with French. Tell us what you think on the Quill and Scroll Honor Society Facebook page! Like us!

About the author: Tara Bender taught English for three years before enrolling as a graduate student in Indiana University’s School of Journalism. Her main interests are feature writing, publication design, and journalism education. Last summer she participated in IU’s High School Journalism Institute as an assistant publication design instructor and was a student in the Management of Student Media course for advisers. She plans to pursue journalism at the professional level before returning to the classroom as a newspaper or yearbook adviser.

