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CAPTURING READER ATTENTION

Your takeaway . . .

Characteristics of compelling stories include strong action, specific angles and plenty of anecdotes. This chapter will tell you why these are important ingredients in your writing recipes. You will learn the five most common mistakes of beginning writers and how to avoid those mistakes. You also will learn the differences between newspaper and magazine writing and why you should learn as much as you can about your readers.

> "*Do you know, Madam, that I would rather write for a magazine for $2 a page than for a newspaper at $10? I would. One takes more pains, . . . looks nicer in print and . . . has a pleasanter audience.*" [Mark Twain in a letter to Mary Fairbanks, May 29, 1870]

"China's Instant Cities" in *National Geographic* chronicles the booming growth of cities and factories along China's northern coast where newly constructed factories churn out everything from playing cards and neckties to table-tennis paddles and socks. To illustrate the country's growth, reporter Peter Hessler told the story of the creation and growth of a family-owned company named "Lishui Yashun Underdress Fittings Industry Co., Ltd.," which makes wire fittings required in the manufacture of women's bras.[1]

"Pat Dollard's War on Hollywood" in *Vanity Fair* told the story of Dollard, a wealthy Hollywood agent and filmmaker, who abandoned Hollywood's "inner circle" to travel to Iraqi war zones, where he was injured and almost killed while producing a documentary that supported

America's war effort. His story was later made into a movie with the same title.[2]

An article in *Atlanta Magazine*, "You Have Thousands of Angels Around You," told a heart-tugging story about Cynthia Siyomvo, a 17-year-old refugee from Burundi who, after arriving in Atlanta without any family, faced the threat of deportation. But soon she discovered a circle of new friends who helped her find a home and began pursuing a biology degree and a career in medicine.[3]

These three stories won National Magazine Awards, the magazine industry's most prestigious awards—equal to the Pulitzer Prizes among newspapers. "China's Instant Cities" won the NMA for Reporting, "Pat Dollard's War on Hollywood" won the top award for Profile Writing, and "You Have Thousands of Angels Around You" won the NMA's top honor for Feature Writing.

These stories also provide rich examples of *action*, *angle* and *anecdotes*, which comprise the three primary ingredients of *interesting* writing. "There is a principle of writing so important, so fundamental that it can be appropriately called the First Law of Journalism and it is simply this: be interesting," wrote Benton Patterson, a former *Guideposts* editor and author of *Write To Be Read*.[4] This book's title includes *Action, Angle and Anecdotes* because we believe that lively action, a fresh, creative angle and lots of anecdotes characterize interesting writing that keeps readers interested and involved.

Action. These stories tell about Chinese cities and factories that grew out of nowhere, a street-side bomb that injured a Hollywood filmmaker in Iraq, and a Burundi teenage girl who discovered a new circle of friends and support from a southern American city.

Action is one characteristic of interesting stories. "Readers love action, any kind of action, and the story that does not move, that just sits there stalled while people declaim, explain, elaborate and suck their thumbs is justly labeled by some editors as MEGO—My Eyes Glaze Over," said William Blundell, in *The Art and Craft of Feature Writing*.[5]

Angle. These stories don't vaguely describe "Chinese industrial growth" or the "status of refugees in the United States." They have a focus—an angle on specific people who have a story to tell that illuminates larger issues, such as the war in Iraq.

An angle makes a story interesting because it provides enough detail about a subject to give the reader some fresh, original information. Broad subjects are vague, fuzzy and boring. Fresh angles give insight into old

topics. You have to find a tiny slice that no one has cut before from a broad topic (such as "time management" or "weight loss") to make a publishable article out of it.

Anecdotes. These three stories contain dozens of anecdotes, which is another way of describing real-life examples and illustrations. They tell *specific* stories about *specific* people doing *specific* things at *specific* times and in *specific* places.

Anecdotes make articles interesting by telling true stories about people doing things. Many articles begin with an anecdote for a good reason: anecdotes tell a story—a tiny tale that draws us into the larger one. They illustrate the meaning of the information that follows. Nothing is more involving or revealing than human drama, and anecdotes capture drama with impact.

SIDEBAR 1

Best American Magazines

Over the past 25 years, these 10 magazines have won more National Magazine Awards than any others. The National Magazine Awards—given by the American Society of Magazine Editors—are the magazine industry's top honors.

The New Yorker
National Geographic
Newsweek
Vanity Fair
Esquire
Sports Illustrated
Rolling Stone
Wired
Time
BusinessWeek

Feature stories are sometimes called "human-interest stories." Good writers understand people as well as they know the language. They are sensitive, socially connected individuals who have an innate sense for finding and writing stories that interest humans. The more you talk to people, the more you understand what people are interested in hearing and discussing.

When most people pick up a magazine or the feature section of a newspaper, they're looking for entertainment or information. If a guy snoozes with an unfinished feature article on his lap, then the publication hasn't done its job. You can't argue that he's too lazy to understand the challenging content. Our sympathies are with the reader. If he got bored, it's because the writers didn't do their job. Great writing is all about reaching the reader through the use of compelling action, specific angles and colorful anecdotes.

FIVE MISTAKES OF BEGINNING WRITERS

After reading thousands of student-written articles for more than 30 years, we've created a list of the most common mistakes we've seen. We will start by explaining these five common mistakes and tell you how this book will teach you to avoid them.

Staying safe in your own backyard

Too many new writers rely on home-grown situations for article ideas and personal connections for interviews. They want to write about themselves, their parents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles or grandparents. Probably every person has a couple of good stories that originate among relatives. But once you write those stories, your tank is empty. You can't become a successful writer by staying in your own backyard. You can't rely on personal experience for more than a few article ideas or limit interviews to those people you know.

The main problem with writing about friends or family members is the writer's lack of objectivity and detachment. For example, what seems fascinating to you about your father may, in fact, be commonplace and boring to most readers. The Model Code of Ethics published by the Associated Collegiate Press says collegiate journalists "Should not cover . . . or make news judgments about family members or persons with whom they have a financial, adversarial or close sexual or platonic relationship." Another reason for avoiding these convenient sources is that they fail to challenge you to venture outside your backyard and find the article ideas and sources you will need to discover week after week and year after year

if you want to become a successful journalist. You also won't be challenged to work in your professional mode as you prepare and execute a probing interview.

Meg Grant, former West Coast editor for the *Reader's Digest*, says: "You really have to be fearless about approaching people and getting them to give you what you need. I think they will often give it to you if you ask them." She says that years ago when she worked for *People* magazine, an editor assigned her to interview the families of three children killed by a drunk driver, who was also a celebrity athlete:

> The editor told me, "You have to knock on their door and talk to some of these victims' families. I know you think they don't want to talk to you, but the truth is they do. They want to talk to someone and they want to tell you about their kids." So I had to go bang on those people's doors and say, "Would you talk to me?" And he was right. They did want to talk.[6]

Some students don't read enough outside of class assignments to know the difference between an original and an unoriginal idea. We know a journalism professor who begins each semester with a student survey that asks class members to list the magazines and newspapers that they read on a regular basis. The vast majority report that they don't read *any* print publication but depend on the Internet to give them the headlines of the day. Not only should future magazine writers read publications, they should read high-quality publications that contain in-depth articles. (See our list of "Best American Magazines.") If you don't read much outside of classes, what you consider a groundbreaking idea may have already been written about dozens of times.

Broad topic that lacks an angle

Second, some beginning writers want to write about a vague topic with an unfocused angle. When we ask for proposals for story ideas, many come up with a vague topic that interests them—but not a story idea. For example, some suggest writing about "the benefits of vegetarianism," on which many books have been written. "What can you tell us about this subject that hasn't been written before?" and "What is your specific angle?" are always the first questions we ask when someone comes up with an unfocused idea. Instead of writing about "the benefits of vegetarianism,"

we'd rather see a narrower angle on "the best vegetarian choices in fast-food restaurants."

Many magazine articles have been written about the advantages or disadvantages of alternative medicine. *Cat Fancy* took this same topic and gave it an angle aimed directly at its niche readership: In "Traditional vs. Alternative Medicine: Which Is Best for Your Cat?" the writer said, "You might be able to improve your cat's quality of life and hasten recovery from illness by including complementary and alternative medicine."[7]

The prevalence of this second mistake is why we're spending two chapters on developing and focusing ideas. Chapter 2 contains a dozen specific ways to come up with an idea while Chapter 3 gives some suggestions for whittling it down into a publishable angle.

Failing to dig deep

Strong, creative writers do a lot of digging. They've learned to be aggressive in seeking interviews and asking probing questions. Jack Kelley, a former senior editor for *People*, says, "Many of the best magazine writers liken their work to mining. They chip and chip until they extract a nugget. Then they chip some more. They are not embarrassed to keep asking questions until they hear what they need. Gold is in the details, and compelling color, quote and detail do not simply materialize."[8] One academic study found that the typical Pulitzer Prize-winning feature story was based on interviews with 53 people.

Scott McCartney, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter, wrote a story about the impact of high gasoline prices on the cost of air travel. He wanted to know what percentage of a ticket price paid for fuel. Airline officials he contacted refused to disclose that information because they considered it confidential. However, he found reports the airlines had filed with the U.S. Department of Transportation that gave him the answer. Six airlines reported an average of 53 to 73 percent of typical ticket prices went for fuel—a dramatic increase over earlier years when fuel prices were considerably lower.[9]

We know student writers who constantly check the word counts on their computers because their goal is to reach the word count that a professor requires. Professional writers typically do the opposite. They do enough research to assemble more than enough good material. Their main problem is "editing down" rather than "pumping up" a manuscript.

Some beginners write articles full of generalizations but lacking detailed evidence that backs them up. Writing skill, while essential, can never carry the article without strong content. Editors want facts, and they love to break stories with news their competitors have missed. Few writers have opinions or personal experiences that are in great demand.

Writing without anecdotes

The fourth mistake is failing to provide colorful, human-interest stories by using anecdotes. Anecdotes are true stories that illustrate the writer's main theme. Some editors have called them the "chocolate chips" of writing because they whet readers' appetite and keep them reading. Anecdotes also add credibility because they give real-life examples to the claims and generalizations made by the writer. For example, *Atlanta Magazine*'s "You Have Thousands of Angels Around You" began with this anecdote:

> She [Cynthia Siyomvo] got off the plane from Paris with nothing more than a couple of small bags. The bags had been packed for days as she waited for Eddie, a stranger who had approached her out of nowhere to say he knew all about her problems and could help. For $155 Eddie had given her a passport in the name of Marie-Therese Ekwa, age 24, from Verviers, Belgium. This young woman, however, was 17, and her journey had not started in Paris, and she had never been to Belgium.
>
> It was just before five in the afternoon. Detroit. September 4, 2001.
>
> The airport agent looked at the passport and asked her to state her business. She spoke very little English and did not understand.
>
> Français?
>
> Oui.
>
> She wore her long hair in braids and had on a T-shirt and pants. She stood five-foot-ten and carried her slender height gracefully, almost gliding. Despite the long flight, she had not slept but rather spent the transatlantic journey in conversation with herself: Where am I going? What am I doing? Have I done the right thing?[10]

Anecdotes are so essential and so difficult to find that they deserve their own chapter in this book. Anecdotes come from the people you interview. Chapters 5 and 10 explain how to find sources and phrase questions that will bring out the most humorous and compelling anecdotes.

Boring articles that lack action

Boring, windy articles lacking any action constitute the fifth mistake. We have read dozens of student articles that sound like condensed research papers or encyclopedia articles. Many beginning writers use stiff, long-winded content that doesn't fit the tone of today's magazines. Other symptoms of this disease occur with too many passive voice verbs, long and convoluted sentences, runaway adjectives and adverbs and an academic tone.

Editors eagerly look for stories that move, outrage, alarm, delight or inspire readers. They want to make their readers laugh, cry or get angry. They would rather receive angry letters to the editor than none at all because that means people are reading their publication. A plodding, formal style is a turnoff to every editor.

Chapter 9 tells you how to avoid boring stories by building action into characters and content. It shows you how to create action by increasing the use of tension, using people to illustrate abstract ideas and increasing the use of narrative, dialogue, action verbs and active voice.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES

Good magazine and news feature stories connect with the reader in a way that differs from a news story. They tug at the heart at the same time they inform and inspire the mind. Is there any difference between newspaper and magazine features? Here's our consensus:

First, newspaper feature writing is shorter and more closely related to current events than magazine feature writing. There is, of course, much overlap and many fine newspaper features could easily appear in magazines. Generally speaking, magazine features may find a common theme in a series of events over time while a newspaper feature investigates one or two recent events. The features in magazines are also closely related to the niche topics of interest to their specialized audiences, while newspaper features more closely relate to current events or topics of interest to a broad audience. Consequently, magazine articles have a longer shelf life than newspaper articles. For example, magazines in public libraries remain on display shelves for at least a month, while most newspapers are changed daily.

Second, newspaper writing aims to please a geographically restricted audience with a broad range of ages, interests and socioeconomic backgrounds. It's like "shotgun writing." Magazine writing is directed toward a geographically diverse, but narrow target audience who has specific interests and demographic characteristics. It's like "rifle writing." With such a broad range of readers, newspapers must appeal to the lowest common denominator of interests, while magazines can cater to the special interests of their narrowly defined audience.

Third, newspaper feature writing is generally detached and objective. The personality of the writer remains hidden. Magazine writers have more freedom to display viewpoint, voice, tone and style in their writing. While newspapers aim for objectivity and neutrality in their reporting, the reputation of many magazines is built upon a particular political or religious point of view.

Fourth, newspapers employ large staffs of reporters and a few editors. Magazines employ large staffs of editors and few full-time writers. Most magazines rely on freelance writers for most of their stories. They don't just do this to save money. Because most magazines have a national readership, they want content from a wide range of contributors who resemble their readers. Although large consumer magazines are typically published in New York City, their editors really want their content to reflect the interests of all types of people in all types of places. That's why freelance writers are important to them.

Finally, newspaper writing requires daily deadlines; magazine writing has monthly deadlines except for a few weeklies and quarterlies. Readers expect more from their magazines: more complexity, analysis, originality, depth, sources and accuracy. Magazine writing is more intellectually challenging for the reader and the writer.

CHARACTERISTICS OF MAGAZINE READERS

Successful salespersons spend a lot of time nurturing relationships with their customers. Likewise, successful writers nurture relationships with their readers. When you write, you always need to ask yourself: "How will the reader react to this? Will this sentence cause the reader to laugh or roll his eyes? Will this paragraph fascinate the reader or send her quickly to another article?"

Good writers need to develop two personalities as they write. The first is the sensitive creator of words and eloquent ideas. But the second is the critical editor, acting on behalf of the reader, who savagely scours the page looking for mistakes and unnecessary content. The editor part of you must be precise and demand perfection.

Readers roam the aisles of supermarkets and department stores and browse through their magazines. Wal-Mart, for example, now accounts for 15 percent of all single-copy magazine sales. Readers sit at computer terminals surfing through Web sites. They browse through an airport newsstand while waiting for their connection. If a title or headline attracts their attention, they pick it up and read. If it holds their attention, they read to the end. Think about this happening millions of times every week, and you get the picture. Editors are paid, writers are paid, magazines are published, Web sites stay in business, and everyone is happy.

Large magazines hire research companies to determine the characteristics of their readers since this information is crucial to advertisers. These characteristics, known as demographics, may include (but are not limited to) their readers' ages, incomes, gender breakdown, educational levels, race and ethnic backgrounds, and percentage of homeowners. You can often find this information on a magazine's Web site under links for potential advertisers. Sidebar 2 includes an illustration of reader demographics of *The New Yorker*, *Rolling Stone*, and *TV Guide*.

We chose these three magazines to illustrate different types of reader characteristics. They have such differing readers that an article written for one magazine would never be publishable in the other two.

SIDEBAR 2

Demographics of Magazine Readers

	The New Yorker	Rolling Stone	TV Guide
Median age	55	28	44
Median household income	$154,933	$64,032	$49,466
Male	52%	59%	41%
Female	48%	41%	59%
Graduated/ Attended College	80%	60%	45%

Source: Magazine Web sites and Mediamark Research, Inc.

You will succeed as a writer if you assume that people who might read your work are:

- ✓ **Busy**. Unless assigned to read for school or job, they are not forced to read magazines, newspapers or the Internet. People use their discretionary time to read feature articles. It's your job to attract their attention and keep it.
- ✓ **Knowledgeable**. They probably know more than you do. People who read a lot of magazines generally have achieved higher educational levels than the general public. Therefore, you must work hard to give them information they haven't seen or heard before.
- ✓ **Easily distracted.** In today's multimedia world, readers have many sources of information from which to choose. Therefore, you can't assume they will finish reading what they begin. You have to find color and human-interest material to include in your stories.

These characteristics may not describe each reader. If you assume that they do, however, you will work harder and get published more quickly than your peers. An interesting article that will attract and hold the reader begins with an interesting idea. So to find an interesting idea, just turn to Chapter 2, and we'll get started.

ENDNOTES

1 Peter Hessler, "China's Instant Cities," *National Geographic*, June 2007, 87.
2 Evan Wright, "Pat Dollard's War on Hollywood," *Vanity Fair*, March 2007.
3 Paige Williams, "You Have Thousands of Angels Around You," *Atlanta Magazine*, Oct. 2007.
4 Benton Rain Patterson, *Write to Be Read* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1986), 6.
5 William Blundell, *The Art and Craft of Feature Writing* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 54.
6 Telephone interview with David E. Sumner, Nov. 29, 2003.
7 Narda G. Robinson, DVM, "Traditional Vs. Alternative Medicine: Which Is Best for Your Cat?" *Cat Fancy*, July 2008, 30–33.
8 Telephone interview with David E. Sumner, Jan. 19, 2004.
9 Scott McCartney, "Flying Stinks, Especially for the Airlines," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 10, 2008, D1.
10 Paige Williams, "You Have Thousands of Angels Around You."