

Teaching Standards in Feature and Magazine Writing Classes

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Introduction

More than 25 years ago, *Writer's Digest* published an article titled "Take Five: The Most Common Mistakes Among Beginning Writers." According to the author, the most common mistake was "staying in your own background." The author explained that too many new writers rely on "home-grown situations" for ideas and "personal connections" for interviews. They never venture outside their immediate environment for article ideas or research. Others mistakes included vague ideas with unfocused angles, lack of in-depth research, lack of quotes and anecdotes, and boring, uninteresting articles.

Anyone teaching feature or magazine writing classes will recognize these problems because they seem so common among our students today. If I probe story ideas from many students, it seems that the thinly-veiled central character or primary source is often their mother, father, sibling or good friend. "Focus" or "narrow your angle" is the most frequent advice I make about their story ideas on the over-worked topics of weight loss, stress management, tattooing, body-piercing, or finding cheap dates and vacation spots. Getting students to do face-to-face and telephone interviews instead of using e-mail seems more difficult every year. Journalism educators may complain about these problems to colleagues over drinks at conventions, only to leave and return to classrooms to face the same frustrations year after year.

Solutions seem elusive because no systematic or scholarly research addresses the most common mistakes that occur among beginning writers and students in feature and magazine writing classes. A review of the last 30 years of *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator* and *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* reveals no studies that address pedagogical issues in feature and magazine writing. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to verify and rank the most common types of problems in student writing assignments for feature and magazine writing classes. It will also ask professors for comments on frequent problems and any solutions they have discovered that seem to work.

Literature Review

While no studies were found that addressed pedagogical issues in feature writing, a few investigated skills that journalism educators should emphasize in their writing courses. Arwood (1994) surveyed 352 newspaper editors and 186 journalism educators about what journalism schools should emphasize in their curriculum. He found that newspaper editors were skeptical of "theory" courses and believed that journalism schools should do a better job of teaching basic

writing skills. Editors and educators agreed that good writing and critical thinking were the most important skills a journalism student should learn. This study, however, did not probe any deeper into what “basic writing skills” involved or specific problems that impeded their development.

Jones (1978) surveyed newspaper editors and journalism educators about the most important skills a newsroom employee should have. He found strong consensus in ranking the 35 most important skills a newsroom employee should have. Both editors and educators ranked clear writing, proper attention to mechanics, and ability to meet deadlines as first, second, and third, respectively.

The American Society of Newspaper Editors (1990) surveyed 600 editors on what they thought journalism schools should teach and asked them to grade the work of journalism schools. The editors found the schools weakest in teaching problem-solving, copy editing, graphic design and instilling an understanding of social issues. Editors gave the schools positive marks in only two areas: teaching news gathering and the teaching of writing. But again, this study did not probe deeper into analytic writing skills involved or specific problems that impeded their development.

The results from these three studies point to a lack of specific or systematic analysis of skill-sets involved in the teaching of writing, especially feature writing. No one has asked the questions to identify the specific components of exciting feature and magazine writing. This dearth of research points to the need to identify the problems that students must overcome if they expect to become successful feature writers. This study, therefore, will ask those questions.

Methodology

This study began with a list of 18 of the most common mistakes seen in feature and magazine writing assignments based on the author’s 16 years of experience in teaching these courses. The author conducted a pilot study by sending this list, first, to five other magazine journalism professors and asking for help in editing and revising the list. Based on their input, the following list represents their consensus of the most common problems:

1. Choosing stale or unoriginal article ideas
2. Choosing an angle that’s too broad and poorly focused
3. Not reading widely enough to distinguish between original and unoriginal ideas
4. Failing to write a catchy or compelling lead
5. Omitting a nut-graph or billboard paragraph
6. Conducting poor-quality or an insufficient number of interviews
7. Failing to provide intelligent insight or fresh ideas
8. Failing to “featurize” material with good anecdotes, quotes, color, humor, etc.
9. Writing articles that do too much “telling” and not enough “showing”
10. Relying too much on the Internet and other secondary print sources
11. Committing too many grammar, punctuation and spelling errors
12. Failing to write tightly edited and clear English prose
13. Not properly citing sources or committing inadvertent plagiarism
14. Failing to check facts resulting in factual errors
15. Pitching an idea to an editor without studying the magazine’s content

- 16. Missing deadlines
- 17. Writing too long or too short
- 18. Writing a weak or ineffective conclusion

In order to encourage a high response rate, a simple one-page questionnaire was developed. It asked the respondents to choose which of these problems they observed most frequently among their students' writing assignments. Each was asked to rate each question on a scale of 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree") indicating to what degree they agreed that it was a commonly observed problem. A "1" indicated a problem they didn't see very often. The questionnaire also asked respondents: "On the back side of this page—if your time permits—please elaborate on problems that bother you the most and solutions to have found to deal with them."

This questionnaire was sent to professors at 305 universities in the U.S., Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom that offered a course in feature or magazine writing. These universities were located by examining course offerings on their Internet sites and combining that information with the membership list of the AEJMC Magazine Division. Telephone calls were also made to these universities asking for the names of professors who taught feature or magazine writing. Names of specific professors teaching feature and magazine writing courses were obtained for 191 universities. For the 114 universities where names of professors were unavailable, the questionnaire was sent to the department chair or dean asking him or her to forward it to the professor who taught the courses in feature or magazine writing.

Besides rating these items, the questionnaire asked respondents to indicate gender, highest earned degree, tenure status, and number of years of full-time teaching experience, part-time teaching experience, full-time professional journalism experience, and part-time professional journalism experience. Table 1 reveals the breakdown in demographic

Variable	Number
Men	73
Women	58
Master's (terminal)	62
Ph.D. (terminal)	60
Tenured	54
Non-tenured	49
FT professional experience (mean)	14.2 years
PT professional experience (mean)	10.4 years
FT teaching experience (mean)	13.0 years
PT teaching experience (mean)	6.4 years
<i>Gender, terminal degree, and tenure variables do not add up to 134 because not all respondents answered these questions.</i>	

characteristics among the 134 respondents: male and female, type of terminal degrees, tenured vs. non-tenured and years of teaching and professional experience.

Quantitative results

From 305 questionnaires sent out, 134 responses were received indicating a response rate of 44 percent. However, since 114 questionnaires were sent to department chairs or deans, these 134 responses represented response rate as high as 70 percent from the targeted population of feature and magazine writing teachers.

Walt Harrington from the University of Illinois wrote in his response, “You’ve done a good job of listing essentially what students need to learn. I could put “5” for all of them.” A few returned questionnaires did have all “5” answers.

Their five most commonly cited problems among students doing feature and magazine writing assignments were: 1) Not reading widely enough to distinguish between original and unoriginal ideas; 2) Choosing an angle that’s too broad and poorly focused; 3) Writing articles that do too much “telling” and not enough “showing”; 4) Conducting poor-quality or an insufficient number of interviews; and 5) Failing to write tightly edited and clear English prose. Complete quantitative results are displayed in Table 2.

This study revealed a remarkable degree of consistency about the five most commonly perceived problems. This continued to be the case when making comparisons by gender, terminal degree, tenure status and years of professional vs. teaching experience. Five of eight demographic categories ranked “Not reading widely enough to distinguish between original and unoriginal ideas” as the most serious problem facing journalism students today in feature and magazine writing classes.

Qualitative results

Ideally every respondent would have given an explanation about the ranking of each problem. But asking for explanations would have discouraged a high response rate. The questionnaire asked for explanations, but emphasized they were optional. Only 17 of the 134 respondents offered any comments about their answers. Those who did expressed strong, forceful opinions about their students’ writing problems. Most of their comments focused on two problems: “Not reading widely enough to distinguish between original and unoriginal ideas” (the first-ranked problem); and “Conducting poor-quality or an insufficient number of interviews” (the fourth-ranked problem).

Table 2
Rank order and scores for most frequently cited problems

Rank	Writing problem	Mean Score
1	Not reading widely enough to distinguish between original and unoriginal ideas	4.15
2	Choosing an angle that's too broad and poorly focused	4.13
3	Writing articles that do too much "telling" and not enough "showing"	4.08
4	Conducting poor-quality or an insufficient number of interviews	4.01
5	Failing to write tightly edited and clear English prose	3.96
6	Failing to provide intelligent insight or fresh ideas	3.87
7	Relying too much on the Internet and other secondary print sources	3.85
8	Committing too many grammar, punctuation and spelling errors	3.67
9	Choosing stale or unoriginal article ideas	3.66
10	Failing to "featurize" material with good anecdotes, quotes, color, humor, etc.	3.65
11	Failing to write a catchy or compelling lead	3.49
12	Failing to check facts resulting in factual errors	3.40
13	Writing a weak or ineffective conclusion	3.40
14	Pitching an idea to an editor without studying the magazine's content	3.29
15	Omitting a nut-graph or billboard paragraph	3.18
16	Missing deadlines	2.85
17	Writing too long or too short	2.84
18	Not properly citing sources or committing inadvertent plagiarism	2.77

Failing to read widely. The "failure to read widely" item was the one on which respondents made twice as many comments as any other single problem. The most common theme in their remarks is that students did not read books, magazines or newspapers outside of their required class assignments. This failure results in a lack of breadth of knowledge and shallowness in the content of what they write. Peggy Elliott from the University of South Carolina (Aiken), summed up this common observation when she said, "Do other professors' students read? Mine only read what is forced upon them. They don't read newspapers and magazines for enjoyment and enlightenment."

Kevin Page from Benedictine University said that he frequently sees the same problem. To compensate for it, he assigns feature stories for students to read that illustrate various writing topics. “Still it’s hard to overcome such a large deficit in just one semester,” he said.

Chris Mackowski of St. Bonaventure University said his students don’t even recognize that they have a problem. “Lack of a breadth of knowledge and a resistance to reading seem to be chronic problems that are getting worse. Most distressing is the fact that most students don’t see it as a problem or if they do, they figure out they should do something about it but never actually do,” he said.

Pat Shellenbarger, an adjunct professor and full-time newspaper reporter in Michigan, said that students’ lack of intellectual depth resulted in shallow stories. “I am concerned about students’ failure to take their feature stories beyond a dull recitation of facts and quotes. Leads in particular tend to be flat and fail to draw readers into a story,” she wrote.

Failing to do adequate research and interviewing. Many comments reflected students’ failure to do substantive research or interviewing. This failure relates to the “getting outside your own backyard” problem mentioned by *Writer’s Digest*. “The main problem I’ve found is lack of depth in reporting,” wrote one professor, echoing comments made by many others. Students tend to choose topics that affect them personally and then rely on the Internet or “googling” for most of their research. One professor said, “If the subject has not affected them personally, they have a hard time relating to it.” Another said, “Students want to write first-person columns about their personal feelings or interview friends or people they know.”

John Brady, a professional-in-residence at Ohio University, described the prevalence of e-mail interviews and reliance on Internet research as “scary.” He wrote, “Interviewing is the key to effective feature writing. Without enough interviews, reporters are writing on empty. I feel so strongly about this problem, I wrote *The Interviewer’s Handbook*” (The Writer Books, 2004).

Comments from Asha Chand, a professor at the University of Western Sydney, revealed that these problems are not limited to American students. She said, “The problem that troubles me most is the lack of motivation in students to investigate issues. They seem happy to use information that is readily available rather than ask questions or dig deep.”

Choosing an angle that’s too broad and poorly focused. Only one professor commented on the second-ranked problem about broad and poorly focused angles. John Lynch’s remarks, however, stated the essence of this problem clearly when he wrote:

The students’ biggest problem is story selection and inability to focus on a specific aspect of a broad topic. Too often my students start with the general idea (let’s do a story on racism) with no specific focus. Too rarely do they start with a specific incidence or circumstance and report from that vantage point.

Solutions. Among the 17 professors who offered qualitative comments, many explained the requirements or assignments they make to try to solve these problems. The following six were reported most frequently:

- Require early reviews of article ideas and first-drafts by professor and student peers
- Require a minimum number of face-to-face interviews
- Prohibit first-person stories or stories about relatives
- Encourage students to get writing experience by working on student publications and completing internships.
- Arrange with local editors to get stories published in local newspapers
- Require written self-evaluations and critiques of their stories

Most solutions center around establishing a required procedure for early review of article ideas and first-drafts. Mark Jerome Walters from the University of South Florida (St. Petersburg) said he works directly with students during the idea-formation stage. “In my experience, most of the problems listed on the survey can be overcome by helping students properly orient their articles during the story-pitching process,” he said. Walters tries to prevent too much reliance on Internet research by “requiring a minimum number of live interviews with sources.”

Kathryn Jenson White urges her students to acquire practical experience and says that those who do progress much more rapidly. “University of Oklahoma Students who write for student media, especially yearbook or have internships on feature desks at magazines obviously start at a higher level and progress more rapidly and more significantly,” she said.

An Australian professor said his department created a partnership with rural newspapers to publish the best stories written by their students. This partnership involves syndicating these stories to newspapers as well as inviting guest editors to speak to classes and tell students what kind of material they need. Chris McGillion from Australia’s Charles Stuart University wrote:

At CSU, we have avoided the common practice in journalism schools of encouraging or mandating students to produce in-house publications. We syndicate features for rural newspapers—so bringing editors and publishers into the classroom and giving students a genuine representative audience. After a pilot programme in 2004, this has become central to teaching professional practice in students’ last year of study.

Carol Schwalbe from Arizona State was the only professor who said she required her students to critique their own stories. She found this technique effective in helping students improve the quality of their work. She said:

I also ask students to [do a self-critique] and discuss what they’ve done well, what they’d do differently if they could do the story again, how they can apply what they’ve learned to future assignments. etc. They’re sometimes tougher at grading themselves than I am. I’ve been amazed by their insights and honesty.

Discussion and Conclusions

“Practice,” “review” and “revise” were frequently mentioned words of advice. While some professors offered workable solutions to some problems, no one had solved the problem of their students’ failure to do significant amounts of reading outside of classroom assignments. Their lack of intellectual depth, intellectual curiosity and strong reading habits will not be solved

by journalism professors. They originate at other levels of society and can be blamed on television, finances and their need to work, lack of parental example or encouragement, poor secondary education, or simple laziness.

I would like to conclude, however, with four personal recommendations that reinforce and build upon the problems and solutions reported in this study. They are based on 16 years of teaching experience as well as significant research involved co-authoring *Feature and Magazine Writing: Action, Angle and Anecdotes* (Sumner & Miller, 2005).

First, like many colleagues whose views are expressed here, I believe some system for early review of story ideas is absolutely essential. I use an early review process for both the query letter (or story proposal) and first-draft for each student's stories in all writing classes. Depending on the class and the nature of the assignment, the technique for providing early review to students can occur in three ways:

1. Classroom discussion of each query letter and first-draft with feedback from both the professor and other students.
2. Online discussion (using *Blackboard*® software) of each query letter and first-draft with feedback from both the professor and other students.
3. A personal conference with each student to discuss his or her story idea and/or first draft.
- 4.

While personal conferences are most time-consuming, they're also the most effective. While I can't meet with each student for every story they write, I try to meet with each student two times each semester. Using these conferences, I help students shape their ideas, sharpen their angles, and direct them to interview sources who can provide expert information. Sometimes I meet after the students have submitted a written query for their story, and sometimes after reading their first drafts.

Besides the practical benefit of improving the quality of student work, these conferences establish lines of communication and a personal relationship with students that improves the emotional atmosphere of the classroom learning. They seem more willing to participate in discussion, more willing to ask questions and respect the answers I may offer.

Second, I believe that requiring a minimum number of face-to-face or telephone interviews is also essential. A 40 percent component of the grade for each story is the "depth and quality of research" which includes a minimum of three to five "live" interviews. To verify the interviewing process, I require students to list the names, telephone numbers, and date of interviews for each person whom they interview. I also require them to submit notes or tapes or interviews as well as copies of other printed sources for each article they write. This research material helps me grade the "depth and quality of research" and discourages plagiarism or the fabrication of sources.

Third, I prohibit first-person stories or stories about relatives. The only exception is the introductory magazine writing class where I permit one story assignment using a parent or relative as a primary source. I stress that if students limit their story ideas to their immediate

environment, they will never develop enough of a portfolio to obtain their first job, much less succeed at it.

Fourth, students always need as much detailed feedback on their stories as professors can possibly provide. Yet grading four or five story assignments for 20 or more students per class per semester make the time required to do this task relentless and demanding. A 2,000-word story can easily require half an hour to grade and critique. I have simplified this task to some extent by using a detailed grading form assigning points to quality of writing, quality of research, originality or quality of focus, and mechanics. The specific point breakdown, as well as grading criteria, can be adapted to the requirements of each assignment. But I use basically the same format for every assigned feature or magazine story in every class.

Advanced Magazine Writing Grading Form	
<u>Quality of writing:</u> 30 points	Total ____
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interesting and compelling lead • Limited use of passive voice construction • Good use of action verbs • Tightly and concisely written • Clearly written sentences that are not too long or confusing 	
<u>Depth of content and quality of research:</u> 30 points	Total ____
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Five personal interviews including names, telephone numbers and dates of interviews. • In-depth content and a strong, interesting story • Interview notes and research notes or copies turned in with article • Appropriate background research in library or Internet 	
<u>Originality, organization or quality of focus:</u> 20 points	Total ____
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Original idea with a clearly focused angle • Clear organization and transitions • Good unity throughout story—no wandering or digression 	
<u>Mechanics:</u> 20 points	Total ____
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wordcount listed on page one; double-spaced numbered pages • Typographical errors (1 point penalty each) • Spelling or errors of fact (3 points penalty each) • Punctuation errors (1 point penalty each) • Grammar errors (1 point penalty each) 	

Probably no one disagrees that writing—especially feature and magazine writing—is more art than science. This study, however, demonstrates that the components of feature and magazine writing can be systematically studied, analyzed and quantified to some degree. Such applied research can build bridges between academics, students and professional journalists. Future research should build on analyzing the 18 problem items addressed in this study and look for specific pedagogical techniques that will help our students find solutions.

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A feature of Academic Writing is its clear and logical organisation, which makes it ideal as a self-study and reference guide for students needing to work independently. This is a recognition that most courses in academic writing are inevitably time-constrained, and that some students may have no other option. In addition to accuracy, students on academic courses are expected to take a critical approach to their sources. This means that your teachers will expect you to question and evaluate everything you read, asking whether it is reliable or relevant. You are also expected to refer carefully to the sources of all your ideas, using a standard system of referencing. Academic Writing: A Handbook for International Students will help you to develop these skills. Managing your time.