Teaching Journalism & Mass Communication | A journal published by the AEJMC Small Programs Interest Group

Vol. 13 #1 (2023), pp. 33-36 https://community.aejmc.org/smallprogramsinterestgroup/publications/journals

Is it Time to Put 'Feature Writing' to Bed?

John-Erik Koslosky
Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania

Abstract

A review of 12 online syllabi for "feature" writing classes showed an eclectic collection of topics covered and skills taught, reflecting the mysterious and confusing nature of the ubiquitous "feature" itself. This article draws from those syllabi as well as the author's experiences as a reporter, editor, instructor and journalism course designer to argue for the timely retirement of the staple "features" journalism course. To replace it, journalism instructors should seek to design a course starting with the end in mind: What role does the course occupy in our broader curriculum, and what are the fundamental skills we want our students to take away? For the author's program, those questions led to a new course in "storytelling" methods and techniques, with a wide range of applications, both in journalism and beyond.

There's a quote in the 1991 textbook *The Complete Book of Feature Writing* that's so good, it still finds its way into lectures some three decades later. The author of the quote is Richard Cheverton, a longtime newspaper features editor.

> "Who the hell really understands what a feature is?" Cheverton asks. "… the essence of a feature is like wrestling a squid; it'll soon depart in a cloud of ink" (Witt, 1991, p. 3-4).

In those words, Cheverton acknowledges that his 10-plus years editing "features" did little to equip him to define what, exactly, a "feature" is. The mystery of the "feature" has grown only deeper in the three decades since Cheverton offered that assessment. The expansion of digital publishing, the growth of alternative story forms such as listicles and interactive quizzes, the rise of podcasting and short-form video all served to further complicate the "feature."

That's why this article is a call to write the epitaph for the "feature writing" course and replace it with a course that provides clearer goals and expectations, and promotes skills that will serve students well into the future, even if they don't find themselves on the features desk at a publication. Some larger programs may have room in their curriculum to offer a number of specialized courses for topics like magazine writing or travel writing. But for many small or mid-sized programs, a more practical course built with flexibility and the future in mind is the smarter bet for our students.

What is 'feature writing' really teaching?

A sample of the first 12 syllabi generated through a Google search of "feature writing syllabus" identified an eclectic smattering of educational goals and outcomes. Many included the types of standard educational goals you might find in any journalism course: journalistic principles of news judgment, fairness and accuracy, legal and ethics standards, as well as common goals around basic journalism practice such as developing interviewing and research skills. But beyond those fundamentals, the syllabi show a wide variation in expected goals and outcomes. Here are just a handful:

Keywords: Journalism, Feature Writing, Storytelling, Media Skills Courses

- "Clear and graceful writing" (DeWolk, 2006).
- Establishing "competence in deep listening and community engagement" (McFadden, 2021).
- The use of "scheduling, outlining and subheads as ways to organize complex stories" (Mogle, 2021).
- Note taking and deadline writing (DeWolk, 2006).
- Identifying markets for articles and writing effective query letters (Darm, 2013).
- "Explore the contemporary news ecosystem: how news gets made, shared, and consumed" (McFadden, 2021).
- Use of statistics (DeWolk, 2006).

A few syllabi specifically referenced the development of narrative techniques, including one that established a goal of applying "literary techniques more commonly found in fiction writing" (Mogle, 2021).

When it came to assignments and story forms studied, there was also wide variation. Some of the most common story forms included personality profiles and trend pieces. But there was also a long list of others, including historical features, Q&As, first-person essays, a "service piece" (Nelson, 2015), "spot featuret" (Nelson, 2015), blog posts, "immersion," (Kraft, 2018), as well as news features and "investigative" stories (Kraft, 2018).

Most courses were focused on journalism, but some included strategic communication, marketing, or other applications of feature writing. One course, from 2011, identified just two forms of feature writing: the newspaper feature and the magazine feature. The assignments included two long narratives: one a minimum 1,500 words, the other a minimum 2,000 (Emig, 2011).

This article calls attention to that variety not to question any educator who incorporates such goals or objects of study into their courses, but to suggest that those wide variations in courses sharing the same title highlight the problem of teaching "feature writing" as a subject. It's a tough if not impossible (as Cheverton implies) thing to define. If we are teaching "feature writing," what *are* we teaching? Perhaps just as important: What role is the "feature writing" course filling in our curriculum?

The author of this article has not been immune to the eclecticism mentioned above during eight years of instruction at Bloomsburg University (now Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania). As a former longtime reporter and editor, the lure of structuring a course around the types of "features" written or edited professionally proved strong. In one semester, a features class focused on long-form narratives, producing magazine-length profiles and in-depth examinations of issues impacting the university community. In another iteration, a class studied multimedia storytelling, examining work by NPR and VOX, among others. In some semesters, students studied old-school newspaper brites. Other instructors have incorporated lessons and assignments revolving around reviews of products, movies, and music.

New course, clearer goals

This past semester, students completed the last-ever feature writing class on the Bloomsburg campus — as well as its now-sibling campuses in Lock Haven and Mansfield, Pennsylvania. After Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education moved forward with merging three of its universities in Central Pennsylvania, retirements and vacated positions left only one journalism professor across four campuses and the need for a new journalism curriculum that could serve students into the future — including remote instruction. (In case it wasn't clear, that job fell on me.)

The cost-cutting, program-streamlining moves being made at Pennsylvania's state universities may well be a sign of what's to come for many smaller U.S. university campuses. The student population is expected to continue its slow decline, due in large part to demographic forces. Students are looking for greater flexibility in their schedules, which has prioritized online and hybrid course delivery. As budgets get tighter, universities are raising the bar on course enrollment minimums, meaning courses need to have as wide appeal as possible.

Beginning in the 2023-24 academic year, Commonwealth media and journalism students will be enrolling in a course called "Storytelling for Journalism."

The course has just three stated student learning objectives:

1. The development and application of narrative and other storytelling techniques
2. The development and application of advanced fact-based information gathering through interviewing, observation, and research
3. A practical understanding of media markets for writers and multimedia journalists

It is important to acknowledge here that there is a longstanding tension over the function of "storytelling" in journalism, as it is often seen as something that runs counter to a just-the-facts approach that

hard news reporting demands (Kormelink & Meijer, 2015). But there are both academics and practitioners who see narrative storytelling approaches as methods that can peacefully co-exist alongside just-the-facts journalism. Although some journalists interviewed for research on storytelling's place in news production saw a clear distinction between "facts" and "stories," others viewed storytelling methods as important tools in a larger journalistic "toolkit" (Boseman & Meijer, 2018, p. 1002). In this view, storytelling approaches are used a way to present factual information more effectively for the audience. They give way to just-the-facts when there are important new facts to divulge, but can be used to provide context and deeper understanding, especially when there's no new groundbreaking facts to report.

It is from that view — toolkit development — that Storytelling for Journalism was created. In this class, students will learn when storytelling approaches such as narrative techniques are appropriate, and they will learn methods of employing those techniques. They will learn how detail is used to set scenes in a reader's or listener's mind. They will learn how to craft story openings that hook readers, give them a taste of what's to come, but leave them wanting more. They will learn how to build anticipation, and how to craft a proper turning point in a story.

They will develop methods of employing detail and dialogue to reveal character. They will write stories that center around personal or organizational struggle, and they will discuss why that element may resonate so strongly with our audience (Ager, 2002). They will learn what kind of information they must collect to make that all possible. They will learn that they can apply similar storytelling techniques across all manner of articles and media: profiles and historical pieces, trend stories and investigative reports, textual print articles, podcasts and video, multimedia presentations, and even infographics.

They will also learn that these techniques can prove effective whether they are writing journalism, producing public relations and marketing materials, doing advocacy work, putting together political campaign materials, making documentary films, writing movie scripts, or penning comic books. The class studies these techniques in the context of journalism — where facts and verification still rule — but strong storytelling skills are portable, and their applications, boundless.

As such, the course — although a journalism course — is intended to appeal to those planning for careers in print and web, as well as those going into TV, film or radio/audio. While the course assignments are designed to facilitate the production of journalistic articles and other media intended for publication in student-run or professional outlets, other professional applications for the skills, such as public relations, marketing and political communications, will be explored.

Just as important, it is no longer a print-centric course focused on the study of features seen in newspapers and magazines. It allows flexibility to adapt the course as new platforms arise. It fills an important role in the curriculum — while still leaving ample room to explore. With a more streamlined set of goals, the new course also should offer greater flexibility to deliver in-person, online or via a "hybrid" or "multi-modal" design.

Retiring old terminology

Several course calendars and descriptions from those syllabi cited above referenced a lesson or discussion focused on understanding the types or varieties of "features," but not all detailed or defined what those "features" would be. At Commonwealth University, we may still have those discussions in our new class. But students won't need to have them in order to make sense of the course material or to understand what skills they are looking to develop in their assignments. The terms "feature" and "features" are relics of print. They deserve, like many relics of the print industry, to be retired. There's a better way forward, and a course centered around skills — and not antiquated umbrella terminology — is a way to start.

References

Ager, S. (2002, August 22). Hearts and Guts: Writing the Personal Profile. Poynter. https://www.poynter.org/archive/2002/hearts-and-guts-writing-the-personal-profile/

Boseman, J. & Meijer, L.C. (2018). Nothing but the facts? *Journalism Practice,* 12(8), 997-1007.

Darm, L. (2013). *Magazine and Feature Writing – JOU 4308*. https://www.jou.ufl.edu/assets/syllabi/JOU%204308%20Magazine%20and%20Feature%20Writing%20Syllabus%20Fall%202013%20Darm.pdf

Kormelink, T.G. & Meijer, I.C. (2015). Truthful or Engaging? *Digital Journalism,* 3(2), 158-174.

Kraft, N. (2018). Syllabus: COMM 4202 Feature Writing. https://nicolekraft.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/featurewritingsyllabus.pdf

DeWolk, R. (2006). Feature Writing Syllabus: Feature Writing (SFSU 0321-01). https://newsport.org/cityroom/?page_id=2

Emig, J. (2011). Feature Writing – Comm 311. https://www.csub.edu/~jemig/F11%20syllabi/Comm%20311%20-%20F11.pdf

Mogle, J. (2021). Feature Writing (syllabus for MCOM 3301.001). https://www.uttyler.edu/communication/files/mcom3301.001_feature-writing_f21dm.pdf

McFadden, S. (2021*)*. Journalism: Feature Writing ENG 304-1400. https://featurewriting.commons.gc.cuny.edu/syllabus/

Nelson, A. (2015). Communication 354-001: Feature Writing. http://www.loyno.edu/courses/syllabi/CMMN-A354-0012015S.pdf

Witt, L. (Ed.). (1991). *The Complete Book of Feature Writing*. Writer's Digest Books. Retrieved from: http://pjnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/02/featurewriting.pdf

John-Erik Koslosky is an assistant professor of journalism in the Department of Media & Journalism at Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania-Bloomsburg. Before entering academia, he worked as a reporter and editor in local news for nearly 20 years, earning awards in investigative, enterprise, beat, and business and consumer reporting. He can be reached at jkoslosk@commonwealthu.edu.