The other basic type of feature, the *timeless* feature, is described by just what the words imply—a story frozen in time. Like frozen food, the timeless feature will keep for a long time without spoiling. A timeless feature might be written in early March and held until April or even May before it is published. The careful feature writer, of course, will check back with the subjects of the story before it is published to ascertain that no facts have changed since the interview. In most instances, nothing will have happened. In other cases, ages or addresses will have to be updated. In rare instances, feature writers will find that major changes will have occurred, perhaps even including the death of the featured subject or of others in the story.

An example of a timeless story would be the one on which Garcia worked. The cab company mechanic's tips on vehicle maintenance are as true in March as they will be in April, May or even June. But the cab mechanic might have retired, quit his job, been fired or dropped dead since Garcia's interview with him. Thus, updating the timeless story is necessary.

The news feature and the timeless feature have a number of characteristics in common. They are original, both in form and in subject matter. They both use description to give them life. They are held to tight journalistic standards of accuracy. They inform or entertain, and sometimes they do both. In short, they both fall within the definition of what a feature story is supposed to be.

In addition, news and timeless features share at least one other characteristic: They are popular with readers. Many studies have shown that readers of general-circulation newspapers tremendously enjoy well-written features. And a feature story with a photograph is an almost unbeatable recipe for high readership because studies have shown that pictures also have extremely high readership value.

And in that sense, feature stories are a lot like ice cream. Few ice cream lovers are neutral about a hot fudge sundae smothered with rich, foamy whipped cream and capped with a blushing cherry. And few newspaper readers are neutral about a well-written, anecdotally rich, professionally illustrated news or timeless feature.

Categories and Appeals

Feature stories, while journalistic, are first and foremost *stories,* with beginnings, middles and ends. These stories—albeit with different characters in different circumstances—tend to recur so frequently that they can be divided into familiar *categories* built around topics of universal *appeal.*

Let's look at the categories first.

There are at least 15 widely recognized types of newspaper features, and many more when individual variations within categories are considered. All can be either news or timeless features, with the exception of the "commemorative" feature, which is almost always tied to a breaking news event.

Remember that while some categories are about things, people are more interesting. The effective feature writer will try to transform the "thing" feature into a "people" feature.

Here are the categories, with examples.

The Business Story. The problem with the business story is that it is easy to write a lackluster little feature about what a business sells (such as live lobsters), makes (such as

cardboard caskets) or provides (such as removal and replacement of aircraft warning lights for television and radio towers). Such stories, however, are boring (except to the owner of the business), and interesting stories are usually very hard to come by because business owners are fearful of tarnishing their images and (unlike government agencies) are not required to provide you with any information unless shares in the business are traded on the stock exchange.

Here's how you can handle the business feature. In most cases, you should focus on an employee or the owner of the business. If the business has competition, you should look for a timely or unusual angle—a reason for writing the story about that particular business at that particular time—and then try to concentrate on an individual. You should also mention the competition to avoid the appearance of giving the business free advertising space. On the other hand, if it is a business with no competition, you could zero in on why the owner started the business and what impediments he or she faced on the road to success. Success is a universal appeal often used by storytellers.

Examples: If fees for personalized automobile license plates in your state are increasing, you write a feature story about the metal-fabricating company that manufactures the tags, focusing on the employee who makes the personalized plates. A veterinarian who specializes in treating exotic animals opens an office in your town. You write a feature about her after following her through a day's medical rounds at the city zoo, where she is a volunteer.

Above all, be aware that you are not writing a free advertisement for the business. If your article reads like copy you would expect to see from the business's advertising agency, press the "delete" button on your computer and start over.

The Commemorative Story. Commemorative stories are news features pegged to the anniversary of an earlier news event. The commemorative story is usually written initially at the first anniversary, with other stories following at five-year intervals. Depending on the event, you can interview people who originally were involved in the story, or, if the individuals are dead or otherwise unavailable, you can write an article capturing the mood of the anniversary.

Examples: On the anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, you interview a local resident who was the Dallas police officer who arrested assassin Lee Harvey Oswald. On the anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, DC, you interview survivors. Or you write an article capturing the sights and sounds of the last day of operation of a 100-year-old downtown hotel.

The Explanatory Story. You can show the reader how electricity or natural gas reaches consumers' homes, how a check written at a store in a distant city reaches the local bank, how a television newscast is assembled or how a radio commercial is created. Again, you should focus on a person in the process. Be forewarned: This type of story requires saturation research; you have to know almost as much about the process as does the expert in your story.

The First-Person Story. In the typical first-person story, something dramatic happens to the writer that is so personal that nothing less than the first person singular ("I") is

appropriate. For example, read the first 45 words from an award-winning *New York Times* feature about toxic shock syndrome.

> I went dancing the night before in a black velvet Paris gown, on one of those evenings that was the glamour of New York epitomized. I was blissfully asleep at 3 A.M.
>
> Twenty-four hours later, I lay dying, my fingers and legs darkening with gangrene.

You have the flavor now.

If you are involved in an airplane crash, a nearly fatal automobile accident with a drunk driver or perhaps a sky-diving experience, the first-person story may be appropriate. Otherwise, consider writing it in the second person, "you." For example, if you get an exclusive interview with a movie star, you might want to write the story this way.

> You've always wanted to meet a movie star. Tuesday you got your chance. Tom Cruise was in town.

The Historical Story. The historical feature is usually loosely pegged to a breaking news event, which gives the feature writer an excuse to do some research in the library and to show readers how their community or world has changed.

Examples: Crews installing new water lines encounter long-buried streetcar tracks, which provide you with a "news hook" to explain how the city was once served by a sophisticated trolley system. Or, construction of a new building is delayed while a pioneer cemetery is moved; you focus on the families buried in the cemetery and explain how they contributed to the development of the community.

The Hobbyist Story. Everyone collects something, ranging from stuffed aardvarks to matchbook covers. Some hobbyists have extraordinary collections. As a feature writer, your job is to make certain that you are writing about the right collector—the one with the biggest, best or most unusual collection in your area. Check this out by talking to other collectors who can identify dealers, who in turn can lead you to national publications that provide a clearinghouse for collectors across the country. If you're about to interview a collector with 10,000 rubber ducks, and the editor of the national publication serving rubber-duck collectors says that's a big collection, you're in business.

The How-To Story. The interview with one or more experts who advise the reader how to accomplish a tricky task is a meat-and-potatoes newspaper feature story. Because experts make a living charging customers for such information, they are often reluctant to give much free advice in an interview. Consequently, you may find yourself calling a number of professionals before you are able to piece together a coherent, helpful account. These stories are usually timeless articles but can be news features if they are pegged to a season (such as how to save money by chopping down your own Christmas tree) or a news event such as a flood (for instance, how to dry a wet carpet).

Example: Like Helen Garcia, you write a story about a mechanic who offers tips for nudging 300,000 miles from an automobile engine.

The Invention Story. You have probably heard about an inventor who is developing a lightbulb that never burns out or perhaps toothpaste that stains teeth red when they are inadequately brushed. Inventors are good feature material. But there's a hitch to this kind of story: Inventors usually will not give interviews until they have formally applied for a patent to protect their ideas, and conservative inventors will not discuss their ideas until a patent has actually been granted, a process that often takes years. Timing is the key.

The Medical Story. People get sick. And people die, some well before their time. There are strong feature stories in illness and death, albeit tough ones to write.

Let's look at stories of illness first. Serious illnesses require huge amounts of money. Some people don't have adequate medical insurance. Thus, relatives of a sick person—often of a sick child—frequently seek out feature writers to chronicle the family's financial plight in hopes that the story may trigger donations. If the medical insurance is adequate but the disease is unusual, the medical story often is focused on the struggle to find the appropriate treatment. If the ill person has recovered from the disease, a story can be written tracing the struggle to overcome the illness.

A variation on the illness story is the medical breakthrough story, which often focuses on a doctor who has succeeded in isolating the cause of a disease.

Stories about impending death are extremely difficult to write because of the emotional toll on both the interviewee and the feature writer. Nonetheless, such stories are occasionally written. A person who learns of terminal illness undergoes certain attitude changes. Eventually, many people approaching death find comfort in leaving a message for the living—perhaps a warning to live life fully or to avoid the habits that have brought on the disease. The feature story carries that message.

The Number Story. This kind of feature uses interviews with experts and a familiar number, such as "10," to put a problem—and sometimes a solution—in perspective.

Examples: You interview police officers and traffic engineers for a story dealing with the city's five deadliest intersections. You interview physicians and nurses to write a story about 10 ways to prepare a child for a visit to the hospital. Or you survey gourmet fast-food eaters to find the town's 10 best hamburgers.

The Odd-Occupation Story. Who washes the outside windows of the city's tallest building? What's a workday like for a modern grave digger? Who heads the city police bomb squad, and what does that work involve? And who changes the little lightbulbs on top of the local television station transmitting tower?

Every community has scores of individuals with unusual jobs—occupations that are dangerous, unappealing or simply strange. Such stories should prove interesting to your readers. A cautionary note: In the past, some fairly ordinary occupations became "odd" when a woman selected a traditionally male job—such as automobile mechanic—or a man opted for a traditionally female-filled position, but less feature value exists today in sex-role stories. A male "nanny" might be interviewed in a wider feature about childcare experts, but not merely because he is a man looking after a child.

The usual story approach requires you to find a person who has held an odd occupation for some time and who enjoys it and to interview that person about how the job is performed, why he or she chose the field, or both.

The Overview Story. Some kinds of features—for example, stories dealing with missing children or with arson—can be supported with voluminous statistics from various official sources. These statistics can be used to provide the reader with an informational overview of the problem, in addition to the emotional, humanistic qualities you will want to inject into the story.

Example: You gather statistics from police and fire departments, insurance companies and the FBI to paint a portrait of a "typical" business arson. You begin the story with a description of a well-known arson in your town, introduce the reader to the information you have gathered from official sources, then move to interviews with two arson investigators who take the reader through the steps used to solve the fire you described at the beginning of the story.

The Participatory Story. Participatory stories go back to the days of Nellie Bly of Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World.* Bly, whose real name was Elizabeth Cochrane, had herself committed to a New York State insane asylum in order to write about conditions there. Frank Sutherland, a reporter for *The Tennessean* in Nashville and later president of the Society of Professional Journalists, did the same thing in Tennessee about 75 years later. And the participatory story was the trademark of writer George Plimpton, who, among other things, joined a football team and acted in a movie to obtain stories.

Hunter S. Thompson, who used to write for *Rolling Stone* magazine, called this blatant injection of the writer into the story "Gonzo journalism." Gonzo or not, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with living a role in order to write about it, unless you misrepresent yourself to write about the intimate details of other people. And even that may not be wrong in the case of investigative reporters such as Bly and Sutherland, who had no other means to investigate serious social problems. However, most feature writers using this approach will, like Plimpton, make arrangements beforehand and will "live" the story with the permission of the participants.

Examples: You want to write about the life of a sanitation worker, so you make arrangements with the city to work as a garbage collector for two days. Or you want to know the fear of being a convenience store clerk on the night shift in a high-crime area, so you talk the store's manager into hiring you for five nights.

The Profile Story. You can profile practically anyone or anything. Of course, profiles are usually written about people, with their cooperation. You usually pick someone of interest, ask the subject for an interview, research and then interview the individual and finally talk to other people who know the subject. If the subject is uncooperative—as was Sam Walton, the richest man in the United States until Bill Gates of Microsoft and investor Warren Buffet took his place, depending on the year in question—you can do what one *Washington Post* writer did. The *Post* writer talked to scores of people who knew the shy Wal-Mart founder in his little hometown of Bentonville, Arkansas, and then wrote a story based on their views of the man.

The profile—with or without cooperation—should paint a word portrait of the subject. The reader should come away from the profile with an understanding of how the person looks, sounds and thinks.

Groups, institutions, events and things can be profiled, too. In fact, in the early 1980s writer Tracy Kidder even profiled the birth of a computer in his award-winning book, *The Soul of a New Machine.*

The Unfamiliar Visitor Story. A visitor often offers a unique perspective on a local problem, culture or event. If the visitor is available for an interview, his or her perspective can often help readers understand their world better.

Examples: Your community suffers from 10 percent unemployment, and you interview a visiting Chinese political scientist about how unemployment is handled in the People's Republic of China. Or a Middle Eastern terrorist group sets off a bomb in a European airport, killing a local resident; you interview Arab students attending a nearby university to obtain their perspective on terrorism.

Some of these features tend to be further categorized because they are published in specific newspaper Web page or print-edition sections such as business, entertainment, fashion, food, health, home, lifestyle, religion, sports and travel. For example, profile stories often appear in business, entertainment, health, lifestyle, religion and travel sections. On the other hand, first-person and participatory stories often wind up in newspaper Sunday magazines. And commemorative, historical and unfamiliar visitor stories frequently find their way into a newspaper's primary news section.

Now let's look at the other tool to help you find a good story—a topic with a universal appeal or attraction.

Flip through any thorough book explaining how short stories, novels, plays and dramatic scripts are written and you will find that most successful fictional stories are constructed around topics of universal appeal. Love is a common subject, for example. Variations of each appeal abound. Love's variations include love conquers all, love given but not returned, and sacrifice for love, among many others. Stories about adventure, animals, children, crime, death, disaster, failure, greed, health, humor, mystery, politics, religion, self-improvement, sex, success, treasure and vengeance also have a broad appeal.

Not every feature has a readily apparent universal appeal, but the best ones do seem to clearly make a statement to and about all of us. Later in this chapter, you'll read more about how appeals are integrated with story categories.

NEWSPAPER FEATURE WRITERS: THE RIGHT STUFF

Writer Tom Wolfe wrote a book titled *The Right Stuff,* which dealt with the first U.S. astronauts. The book's title referred to the character, courage and other personality traits of those early space travelers.

Newspaper feature writers also have to have the "right stuff" to be successful.

In the case of feature writers, the right stuff includes the ability to enjoy all kinds of people, curiosity, a keen sense of observation, a good knowledge of the language, an