WHAT MAKES A STORY INTERESTING?

KEY POINTS

- Why action, angle and anecdotes matter
- What makes a story interesting?
- Understanding readers and reader demographics
- Five mistakes of beginning writers

“The Sálvame, por favor. Sálvame. Save me. Please save me,” he prays to Our Lady of Guadalupe. In the chilly, early morning hours of March 24, 2009, 57-year-old José Arias fights for his life, floating in the water 66 miles from Cape May. The nearest lights are from another fishing vessel, which does not see him, anchored less than a half-mile away. A little farther out, a mammoth container ship steams toward Philadelphia. Although Arias does not know it yet, all six of his friends and fellow fishermen are dead, and the red-hulled scalloper, the Lady Mary, is resting, right-side up, on the sandy bottom of the Atlantic.

Thus begins “The Wreck of the Lady Mary,” a story that won the Pulitzer Prize in feature writing for Newark Star-Ledger reporter Amy Ellis Nutt. She reported a deeply probing story of the mysterious sinking of a commercial fishing boat that drowned six men in the Atlantic Ocean.¹

“The Man the White House Wakes Up To,” in the New York Times Magazine, profiled Mike Allen, publisher of the daily e-mail newsletter Playbook, which thousands of the nation’s most influential political leaders, media...

executives and journalists read daily for their “insider” news about politics.\(^2\) The profile, which won a National Magazine Award, told this anecdote about Allen:

In 1993, Allen was covering a trial in Richmond, Va., for The New York Times (as a stringer) and The Richmond Times-Dispatch (which employed him). He found a pay phone, darted into the street and got whacked by a car. Allen composed himself, filed stories for both papers and then found his way to the hospital with a broken elbow. This is one of the many “Mikey Stories” that Washingtonians share with awe and some concern.

“You Have Thousands of Angels Around You,” from Atlanta Magazine, 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 she began pursuing a biology degree and a career in medicine.\(^3\)

These stories, all of which won either the National Magazine Award or the Pulitzer Prize, offer rich examples of action, angle and anecdotes, 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.\(^4\) The book you are holding includes “Action, Angle and Anecdotes” as a subtitle because we believe that lively action, a fresh, creative angle and lots of anecdotes characterize interesting writing that keeps readers reading.

**Action.** These stories tell about a mysterious sinking of a commercial fishing boat that the U.S. Coast Guard spent months investigating, a high-profile political reporter who talks daily with senior officials in the White House and Congress and a Burundi teenage girl who discovered a new circle of friends and support from a southern American city.

“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,” wrote William Blundell in The Art and Craft of Feature Writing.\(^5\)

**Angle.** These stories offer an angle on specific people who have experiences to share that illuminate larger issues. 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
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and boring. Fresh angles give insight into old topics. You have to discover a tiny slice that no one has yet cut from a broad topic to make a compelling and publishable story.

For example, in the Good Housekeeping feature “The (Surprising) Truth About Salt,” a National Magazine Award finalist, writer Rachael Moeller Gorman, tackled the unusual angle that salt is not necessarily “bad” for everyone. She interviewed doctors and medical researchers who said that, while it makes sense for some people with high blood pressure to lower their salt intake, current science shows that most people will reap little, if any, benefit from reducing their salt intake.

Anecdotes. “The Wreck of the Lady Mary,” “The Man the White House Wakes Up To” and “You Have Thousands of Angels Around You” 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.

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

Successful salespersons nurture relationships with their customers. Likewise, successful writers nurture relationships with their readers. Good writers need to develop two personalities as they write. The first is the sensitive creator of words and eloquent ideas. 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 your mind must demand perfection.

When you write, always 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?”

We frequently refer to “the reader” in this book because great writers develop a second-sense about for whom and to whom they are writing. As you build experience as a writer, you develop a sense of what interests readers and what bores them. Your readers scan their tablet computers and smartphones while they roam supermarket aisles and airport lounges. They
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browse through cover lines of articles while waiting in line for the checkout or to make their plane connection. If a title attracts their attention, they read it. 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, websites stay in business and everyone is happy.

Large publishers hire research companies to determine the characteristics of their readers because advertisers demand it. Known as “demographics,” this information includes readers’ median ages, household income and gender and race percentages. You can often find this information on a publication’s website under links for advertisers. Sidebar 1.1 includes an illustration of the differing reader demographics of *The New Yorker*, *Rolling Stone* and *Lucky*. These magazines’ readers differ so much that an article written for one magazine could never be published in the other two.

**Demographics of Magazine Readers (2012)**

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<thead>
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<th>The New Yorker</th>
<th>Rolling Stone</th>
<th>Lucky</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Median age</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median household income</td>
<td>$157,247</td>
<td>$64,160</td>
<td>$82,293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduated/attended college</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>44%</td>
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Source: Magazine websites and MR1Plus.com (Mediamark Research, Inc.).

When most people read an article, they seek diversion, entertainment or information. If a reader doesn’t finish an article, you can’t blame the reader; blame the author. You can’t argue that the reader is too lazy to understand the challenging content. If the reader feels bored, the writers didn’t do their jobs. Great writing is all about reaching the reader through the use of compelling action, an original angle and colorful anecdotes.

The best way to develop sensitivity for the reader is to read—a lot. If you are not an avid reader who reads everything you get your hands on, it’s doubtful you will ever be a great writer. Read books, blogs, bulletin boards, billboards, menus, manuals, meeting minutes, magazine articles in the doctor’s office and online articles anywhere you go. Read the fine print.
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before you “agree” to a download; read the junk mail before you throw it away. Even if you find it boring, you’ve improved your writing ability because you now possess a better sense of what bores people and what interests them. If you don’t read much outside classes, you may not realize that what you consider a groundbreaking idea may have already been written about dozens of times.

Great writers acquire intellectual depth from a huge amount of time spent reading. It’s not enough to know the mechanics of writing or how to put together a coherent sentence. Most college students know how to do that. To break out ahead of the journalism pack, you must acquire ideas to write about. You must possess a well of ideas drawn from reading hundreds of books and periodicals.

FIVE MISTAKES OF BEGINNING WRITERS

After reading thousands of student-written articles for more than 35 years, we’ve created a list of the most common mistakes. 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

A newspaper editor once joked to a group of journalists at a workshop that “News is what happens to or near the editor.” Many new writers, unfortunately, develop their story ideas based on what happens to or near them. They rely on home-grown situations for article ideas and personal connections for interviews. They write stories about themselves or their parents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, or grandparents. That’s a good start. Probably every person has a few good stories that originate among relatives or friends. But, once you’ve written those stories, your tank is empty. You can’t become a successful writer by staying in your own backyard.

The main problem with writing about friends or family members is your lack of objectivity and detachment. For example, what seems fascinating to you about your father may, in fact, be common and bore 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 to avoid these convenient sources is that they fail to challenge you to venture outside your backyard.

Introduce yourself to a stranger, join a club or listen to a visiting speaker. Visit a museum or browse the stacks in the library for new experiences and ideas. Listen to a politician whose views differ from your own. If you are a Christian, visit a synagogue or mosque. If you are a Muslim, visit a church or synagogue. If you are a Jew, visit a church or mosque. If you are not religious, visit any house of worship.

Call a stranger and ask for an interview. If you can’t do that, your future in journalism is doubtful. Meg Grant, an editor for *AARP* magazine, 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.

Choosing a broad topic that lacks an angle

Second, beginning writers often want to write about a vague topic without an angle. When we ask students for proposals for story ideas, many come up with a vague topic that interests them—but not a story idea. For example, here are six of the most over-worked topics that students frequently propose:

- getting along with a roommate
- tips for healthy eating
- how to lose weight
- stress prevention for college students
- exercise tips to stay fit
- fashion trends and advice

Besides lacking a specific angle, these topics originate in the “backyard” of college students. Even a more specific topic such as “the benefits of vegetari-
anism” is too broad. “What can you tell us about this subject that we haven’t read before?” and “What is your specific angle?” are always the first questions we ask when someone comes up with an unfocused idea like this. 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 magazines and newspapers have published stories 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 wrote, “You might be able to improve your cat’s quality of life and hasten recovery from illness by including complementary and alternative medicine.”

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 to a publishable angle.

Failing to dig deep

Strong, creative writers dig deep. They aggressively locate experts, request interviews and ask 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.

One academic study found that Pulitzer Prize-winning feature stories were, on average, based on interviews with 53 people.

Some articles by beginning writers exhibit a credibility problem. These authors write in their own voices, failing to give any examples, illustrations or quotes. For example, one student wrote about how to use proper nutrition and vitamins to solve common medical problems. Since this college student lacked training in either medicine or nutrition, the reader would have had a problem recognizing her as an authority on the topic. Therefore, the reader wouldn’t have been sure whether to trust the information.
If you aren’t an expert on the topic you write about, you have to quote experts, as well as give examples and everyday illustrations. You have to interview several people and dig deep to find these expert sources. These people don’t just appear in your life or knock on your door. The time to start is when you are doing the research, not after you sit down to write.

Some student writers constantly check the word counts on their computers because their goal is to reach the word count that a professor requires. Professional writers typically have the opposite problem. 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 in 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.

**Digging Deep**

Here is an excerpt from the Newark *Star-Ledger*’s published report about how its Pulitzer Prize-winning story, “The Wreck of the Lady Mary,” was researched:

Reporting began in January after the U.S. Coast Guard finished its investigative hearings. For the next seven months, Amy Ellis Nutt made dozens of trips, to Cape May, Philadelphia, Atlantic City and North Carolina. Those interviewed included: the co-owner of the Lady Mary; the boat’s sole survivor; family members and friends of the six men who died in the sinking; scallop fishermen, especially those working within six miles of the Lady Mary the night she disappeared; the divers who explored the sunken wreck; officials from the Coast Guard and the rescue crew who saved José Arias; and the dock manager for Hamburg Sud, the shipping company that leases the container ship Cap Beatrice.

Some 800 pages of testimony from Coast Guard hearings were reviewed, navigation and vessel tracking records studied, and nearly two dozen marine experts interviewed, a number of whom had specific training in shipwreck forensics. Two sources with direct access to the investigation also provided documents the Coast Guard refused to make public because it has not yet released its report. In addition to evidence from the sinking of the Lady Mary, the *Star-Ledger* also combed through more than 2,500 Coast Guard incident reports from 2002 through 2007.
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Writing without anecdotes

The fourth mistake is failing to use anecdotes. Anecdotes tell true stories that illustrate the writer’s main theme. Some editors call them the “chocolate chips” of writing because they whet readers’ appetites and keep them reading. Anecdotes add credibility because they give real-life examples to the claims and generalizations made by the writer. The reason that anecdotes and examples increase credibility with readers is that they give true examples of the point you make. They tell a story about a specific person doing a specific thing in a specific place at a specific time.

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. Chapter 10 explains how to find sources and phrase questions that will bring out the most humorous and compelling anecdotes.

Writing boring articles

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, bloated content that doesn’t fit the tone of today’s magazines. Other symptoms of this malady are the use of 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 prefer angry letters to the editor than none at all because that means people are at least 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.

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

- *Busy.* People are not forced to read magazines, newspapers or Internet content. People use their discretionary time to read feature articles. It’s your job to attract their attention and sustain it.
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- **Knowledgeable.** People who frequently read books and articles are generally more educated than the general public. Therefore, you must work hard and dig deep to give them information they haven’t read before.
- **Easily distracted.** In today’s digital world, readers can choose from hundreds of sources of information. You can’t assume they will finish reading what they begin. You have to find color and human-interest material to sustain readers to the end.

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.

What makes a story interesting? The most interesting stories are original; they captivate the hearts of readers as well as their minds. They tell readers something they’ve never read before because they have an unusual angle. They sustain the reader’s attention because they are full of action and anecdotes.

**IN-CLASS ACTIVITIES**

Instructor: Ask students to bring a favorite feature article to class. Students: Write a 50-word summary of the article you find the most interesting. Read the summaries in class and discuss the action, angle and anecdotes contained in the stories.

Instructor: Ask each student to recall a humorous or dramatic experience he or she has had during the past five years. Discuss these stories from the perspective of “action, angle and anecdotes” explained in this chapter.

**ASSIGNMENTS**

Students: Find 10 stories with an anecdotal lead. Remember that an anecdote should tell a story about a specific person at a specific place and time. Explain how each anecdote introduces the angle and main idea of the story that follows.
Students: Interview five random people, asking these two questions and recording the answers: “What characteristics of any article you read make it interesting to you?” and “What characteristics of any article you read make it boring?” Bring the results of your survey to class. In small groups, determine common characteristics of interesting and boring articles.

NOTES