

WRITING FEATURES

And let's all accept our new robot overlords

THE 2011/2012 *GATEWAY* GUIDE



Published by



INTRODUCTION

Content

Justin Bell
Managing Editor
2010-2012

Original concept conceived and produced by Justin Bell

Special thanks to other section guides, from whence ideas, and whole layouts, were stolen.

Phone: (780) 492-6654
Email: managing@gateway.ualberta.ca

The Gateway Feature
Writing Guide ©2011
by the Gateway Student
Journalism Society



Hello intrepid *Gateway* volunteer or random student who found this guide on top of a pile of trash. You have found yourself the keeper of the information, a guide to the crazies and zaniest form of journalism there is — feature writing.

Sure, it can be scary. Having to find a whopping 2,500 words to write about a single topic can vex even the greatest of writers. But hopefully by the time you've read through this, you will be better equipped to tackle your own feature, wrestling it to the ground like a 400-pound alligator intruding on a family picnic.

Features are, I'm told, one of the most well-read sections of the paper. You get two-to-four pages all to yourself to discuss ... well, almost anything you like. And you can take up to a month or two to pull together your idea, so there's long lead times.

But that freedom comes at a cost, that cost being your sanity. Two pages of writing can mean anywhere from five to seven interviews, and a load of research you may never use.

At the end, though, you should have an amazing portfolio piece and a newfound respect for long-form writing. So read on and learn what it takes to be a feature writer.

Good luck,
Justin Bell
Managing Editor 2011/12

GATEWAY FEATURES

Features: some basic facts

If you're reading this guide, then you probably know at least a few things about *The Gateway* — you've at least been up to the office, after all. But here are just a few basics for you.

The Gateway is published once a week throughout the school year, pretty much every Wednesday from September through April. We generally publish one feature per week, but would be open to more if there's interest.

Feature meetings will happen every **Thursday of the school year at 5 p.m.** in the couch room. There we will talk about upcoming features, give some advice and feedback to other feature writers, and talk about possible story ideas.

Once you've got your assignment, it's important to stick to deadlines. For features, each assignment will be given specific deadlines, but generally they have to be in almost a week before publishing so that the editing process can take place. This can obviously be negotiated if there's a specific event you want to attend that means you can't meet your deadline. But talk with Managing Editor Justin Bell beforehand so everyone is kept in the loop.

With a new Wednesday publishing day, features will be due on the Friday before publication. This will give us enough time to work together to make the feature

work, and get the writing to where we want it.

This is more lead time and earlier deadlines than most of the other sections, but the nature of the material often means more editing and back and forth with the editor. But, as a writer, you will likely have had more time to prepare anyways, so it all comes out in the wash.

Electronic submissions should be in Microsoft Word format (please ensure it's a .doc file, not a .docx) and should also be pasted into the body of an email. For photos, coordinate and communicate with the photographer on the assignment to ensure that the photos they took get to the Photo Editor. This can be something that you arrange with both myself and the Photo Editor.

But what is a feature?

First, a brief explanation of what a feature is. Features are longer articles, generally 1,000 to 3,000 words, that focus on a single topic to give it more attention. Each feature is given one to four pages (depending on its length, importance, and relevant illustrations) with a special layout treatment.

But other than their length, individual features rarely have anything to do with one another. We could publish an investigative piece one week about the health of university students, and a fun rundown of local stores the next.

To get you started, here's some broad categories features often fall into:

Investigative news piece: This is the sort of bread and butter of the feature section. Here, writers take a topic and do more thorough investigative work. Previous examples include a three-page feature

on carbon capture technology and two-part feature on poverty and homelessness in Edmonton. These features follow the news style (check out the amazing *Gateway News* guide) in their construction and require, on average, anywhere from three to six interviews as well as additional research.

Cultural examination: Much like a news feature, these are fairly straightforward. But they take a certain cultural interest, be it rodeo or long-boarding, and expand upon it. Why is it important? Who does it? How does it fit into our wider culture? These features are generally a bit softer than news features and have a bit more of a first-person voice.

The Lists: It's a broad category that can encompass everything from rating local bars to talking about the best places to go on vacation. This is a category I would also refer to as "news you can use," where we dispense advice that you are more likely to use in your day-to-day lives than, say, what the SU is up to. These are usually softer in nature.

The personal account: Sometimes people do things that are truly amazing, and we give them space to talk about it. Sometimes they do incredibly mundane things that have an interesting spin, and we decide to write about it. Want to live like a 19th century peasant for a week? How about spend three days without talking to anyone?

These features generally have an "angle" to them, a key message you're trying to get at. It doesn't have to be overly serious (see *A Year Living Biblically* by A. J. Jacobs) and can often be a fun romp. But the next person who suggests they

will live without the internet for a week is going to get a smack.

Photo feature: Sometimes your subject would be better camptured through the medium of photo rather than in writing. And don't worry: we here at *The Gateway* are more than willing to allow you to fill literally pages full of photos. It means less editing to do for us.

Don't let this list limit your feature pitches; these are just some of the more popular categories that features fall into. If you have an idea, but it doesn't quite fit, pitch it anyways. That's the beauty of features: they can be about just about anything. And while Managing Editor Justin Bell is often a big grumpy bastard, he's always willing to talk about journalism and any ideas you may have.

But now what?

So now that you know what features are, how do you go about preparing one? Here are the steps you should go through in order to put together good features.

The pitch

The most important part of the feature is your pitch. While the Managing Editor will often have a number of ideas ready with possible sources, you are encouraged to pitch your own features as well. But before you do that, make sure it's refined to the best of your ability. Who do you plan on talking to? How long do you want to write it? What about photos? You should have a good idea of what you want to write about and how you plan on writing it before your project is even green-lighted by the editorial staff. If it's

not approved on the first attempt, don't be discouraged; there's still time to refine your idea.

Photos/Illustrations

There's an old proverb that says there are many ways to skin a cat. While I'm against animal cruelty, the saying does apply somewhat to features—illustrating your feature can take one of many forms. Photos are generally the most accepted format, but we can also do photo illustrations (set up shots), regular illustrations (comics or other drawings), or even infographics. Have something in mind before starting your feature and discuss it with the Managing Editor during the pitch phase.

Research

Now that you've had your feature approved, you are into the research phase. No matter what type of story you are writing, you're going to have to do some research. It's difficult here to discuss what type of research you should be doing, but the more information you have to start with, the easier the writing process will be.

Make sure you are sticking closely to your pitch when doing your research, keeping in mind your original idea.

Interviews

Along with your research, interviews will typically provide most of the information for your feature. Depending on what type of feature you're writing, you may need none, or you may need ten for multi-part features. Try to think of who would be relevant to talk to so that you

not only get opinions from people who know about what you're covering, but that the feature itself is balanced. And always bounce ideas off of myself or any of the other editors; we're always happy to help and give suggestions. For more on interviewing techniques and how to come up with questions, consult the Gateway News Guide.

Writing

This should be the easiest, or least time-intensive part of the feature. If you've put in a lot of time into research and preparation, it should go fairly easily. Remember to keep on topic and follow the tone you set out in your pitch.

Also remember to add colour and feeling to the story. If your interview subject was standing in a pile of broken parts when you did your interview, maybe add that. It's always more interesting to place interview subjects in their surroundings than simply "said Smith." It brings the reader into the piece and gives them buy-in.

Editing

While you may have sent your piece in, your job isn't necessarily over yet. You should have all your notes from your research and interviews (keep your recordings and transcripts!) and be prepared to answer questions from your editors during the editing process. Minor grammatical errors or spelling will be fixed by the Managing Editor, but any major changes will be sent back to the writer to fix. It could take two or three edits before a piece is up to publishing standard, so be prepared.

Layout and design

The last stage of the feature process is the layout. The Design & Production Editor is generally in charge of laying out features, along with input from the Managing Editor and Editor-in-Chief, but we always appreciate having input from the person who actually wrote the feature.

Start thinking about what sorts of visuals you would like from an early point. If you keep illustrations in mind when doing interviews and research, it makes our life that much easier on the other end.

A few words to cap it all off

Unfortunately, there's not a whole lot to say about feature writing. Every feature is different, with a different subject and tone, writing style and layout. No two features will be similar in feel.

But features are, above all else, a place to have a little fun with your writing. You can break out of the mold and try new things. You can write about whatever you want (assuming you can relate it back to students somehow) and can even try different tones in your writing.

Check out the other section manuals, the Duck Book, the *Gateway News Guide*, and above all the *Gateway Staff Manual*; they'll give you more perspective on what we're doing here, and you'll start to figure out what you're interested in writing and how you and *The Gateway* can best serve each other.

Notes!!

Notes!!

Notes!!

