

Writing skills: feature styles

Below is a useful (but not exhaustive) list of different types of features. The challenge for any writer is working out which style best suits the material you are working with.

Backgrounder:

A piece that usually runs in conjunction with a news story. Its aim is to offer insight and depth that may not be possible with a simple re-telling of the facts of the story.

Interview:

Speaks for itself but requires two difficult skills. First there is the skill of getting the most out of your subject. The second is the ability to put it into words in an entertaining and engaging way.

Profile:

Important to understand the difference between an interview and profile. A profile – as in the case of the Sunday Times regular profile – may contain no attributed quotes at all. It is assembled from a variety of sources to paint a picture of a prominent person.

Analysis:

Similar to a backgrounder but sets out to explain in some detail a particular topic or theme. Most often found in politics and business coverage but can be applied to almost any area of print publications.

Case Studies:

Found everywhere from the top selling women's magazines to the smallest niche B2B publication. Magazine editors love case studies because they tell stories through people.

Q & A:

Sometimes, depending on the subject matter, an interview may be best done as a Q & A – where the journalist writes out the questions and answers. Usually it is done to reveal the tone of the interview which allows the reader to draw their own conclusions.

Personal preferences:

Readers love to know what celebrities have in their fridge, what their favourite food is or why they love their car. It's a great way to place features as well – they are usually in regular slots and those slots need a lot of filling.

Twenty Questions:

Variations of this are everywhere. Sometimes it's called the 60 second interview. The pieces are usually short and snappy and involve posing a standard set of questions every week to different people.

Colour piece:

The colour piece is a supporting feature that adds detail and atmosphere to the main story. It allows the writer more freedom and the aim is to get a feel for what it was like to 'be there'. Colour writers are much prized by editors as they can add real class to a newspaper or magazine's coverage.

First Person:

The first person piece takes the writer out of the frame altogether and lets the subject tell the story in their own words. Much favoured by True Life magazines that are filled with individuals' tales of triumph and tragedy. Still requires a good deal of skill to execute well.

Lists:

Top tens, top twenties, ten things you never knew about all these make great, easy to read features.

Picture-led:

We live in a visual age – picture driven features that are well thought out can be a great, quick way to illustrate a story.