



Section Two: Analyses of Specific Genres

Follow the Bread Crumbs: Adhering to the Conventions of a Genre

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Courtney Schoolmaster has an MA in English Literature and a passion for Ms. Piggy quotes. In fact, like her idol, she plans “to write more books whenever (she) can find the appropriate writing attire and color-coordinated pen.”

FOLLOW THE BREAD CRUMBS



ADHERING TO THE CONVENTIONS OF A GENRE

Courtney W. Schoolmaster

As I write and rewrite and delete and write and get frustrated, I want to give up. I can't do this. No, I will do this. I will force myself to sit in this cafe, and write until I finally compose something that will catch your attention. UUGH! It's not working again.

I know how it needs to look. I have studied feature articles, those articles in magazines and newspapers that take an in-depth look at a subject; I have even read articles on how to write feature articles. Step One: Write an attention grabbing lead (feature articles don't refer to the opening paragraph as an introduction—the second paragraph of the essay gets that distinction) that packs a punch and “hooks

the reader hard.” Step Two: Write an introduction that explains the focus/angle (thesis) of the article.

After that point Kim Kavin author of *The Everything Guide to Writing* states, “Your task becomes maintaining their interest throughout the rest of the story, by packing in solidly reported information and interesting word choices, of course but perhaps, by using a technique that some writers refer to as leaving a trail of bread crumbs.”

I know the steps. Well, they aren't really steps, they're conventions: loose guidelines that direct how the genre looks, sounds, acts and interacts using the elements of writing.



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The problem is that while most writing uses the same elements, thesis, introduction, conclusion, etc., the way in which they are used differs. And that is not easy. Not only do I need to find a topic, conduct research and write the article, I need to place the article in a context and explore how that context affects my decisions. And right now I am failing at a key convention of the feature article: a solid, brief, catching lead.

Take a look at this March 2, 2008 feature article written by Michael Grunwald, a freelance writer for *Time Magazine*, “The Green Mountain State was once an independent republic, and it still goes its own way; a 2007 state-wide poll found 13% support for secession. Vermont was the only state to support the Anti-Masonic ticket in 1832 the only state except Utah to go for President Taft in 1912, the only state except nearby Maine to oppose President Roosevelt in 1936. No one has ever claimed that as Vermont goes, so goes the nation. So on Tuesday, when Vermont’s voters go to the polls, the world will be watching—Texas and Ohio.”

Did you see how he did that? Grunwald gives you all of these obscure facts about Vermont and builds intrigue knowing that the Vermont primary is in two days and with such a close race, Vermont may finally lead the way. And whoosh, he rips the rug out from under us. Yet, with those 92 well crafted words we dangle like a fish from a rod—hooked with no escape. He intrigues us and makes us want to read on and more than likely we never noticed it happen. Brilliant.

But, as you can see, I am not doing that. Well, at least I don’t think I am. Then again, if you are still reading this then maybe I have achieved my first goal.

Feature articles cite in a completely different way than a policy piece for a political science class. They don’t use MLA or APA.

Tell me, you can be honest—am I intriguing you? Just a little?

Ok, let’s say I have and move on to another key feature.



MAGAZINE & NEWSPAPER GENRES

News Stories
Features
Op-eds
Editorials
Columns/
Departments
Reviews
Comics
Obituaries
Political Cartoons
Classifieds
Letters to the Editor
Horoscopes
Advertisements



CONVENTIONS

LEAD/INTRODUCTION

- Hook
- Catchy Title
- Focus
- Who, What, Where, Why

CONTENT

- Anecdotes & Examples
- Frequently Cite Authorities
- Examines a Subject in a New Way or Relates to A Current Event Surrounding the Subject Leads the Reader Where The Author Wants Them to Go
- Answers all the Reader's ?'s
- Provides Solid Information
- Illuminates the Subject

STRUCTURE

- Short Sentences
- Brief Paragraphs
- Active Voice
- Defines Jargon
- Suited to Magazine/ Newspaper FORMAT
- Single Spaced
- Inserts & Pull Quotes
- Headings & Subheadings
- Large Title, Byline
- Lots of Pictures with Captions

ENDING

- Gives Your Article Sense of Completion
- Complements the Entire Article but does not Overwhelm It

Step Two has me introducing the focus of my essay. This is a little trickier. According to the *Writer's Digest Handbook on Magazine Writing*, many writers "mistakenly believe that their focus is the same as their topic."

Though another convention of feature articles is sometimes I can rely on my title and teaser (a brief opening that gives readers a glimpse of the content) to help achieve this goal. So, maybe I don't need a stated focus sentence in the essay. Watch this. I am going to tab up to the top of my essay and write a brilliant title with a teaser that makes everything clear.

Now that I have you hanging on my every word and we have introduced the topic and focus, we can work on Step Three, the body of the article. "The body (of the essay should) aim for a spicy mix of facts, direct quotes, paraphrases, reported information—all play(ing) key roles in keeping the reader from nodding off while the story unfolds" (Corrigan 14).

Wait. Wait. Wait. I can't do that. Don't you understand? What was I thinking? This is a feature article. Feature articles cite a completely different way than a policy piece for a political science class.

They don't use MLA or APA. Feature article cite an authority by name and give you the authorities' credentials and

then they quote or paraphrase the authority. I can't just ignore how the genre uses a convention.

Now that I have realized my mistake this seems like a good place to start my next paragraph. I know that feature articles have short, concise paragraphs that convey one piece of information before moving on to the next and I know that my next paragraph can continue to talk about the subject of my last paragraph.

I know that features article use lots of examples and anecdotes to support their paragraphs and frequently cite authorities to prove their points. They often write from a personal perspective and attempt to make an emotional connection with the audience. Writers of feature articles often wrestle with time questions and use time as a transitional device says Harvard Extension Professor, John Lenger. They have short sentences and active verbs and rely heavily on the visual side of the medium to assist in making the article audience friendly.

Wait. Wait. Wait. I am doing it again. I am failing to stay true to my genre's conventions. You see, the audience of a feature article is looking for short sentences and complex ideas presented simply. I can't just throw in a paragraph that is one long list of conventions.

I hear the page turning already—now their reading an article on Six Ways to Writing Success. Not only have I bored them, but I more than likely lost them as a reader. Along with that, I need to remember another basic rule of writing: keep a unified tone throughout the article. Nothing about that last paragraph shouts unity.

Ok, so here is what we are going to do. We are going to strike the last paragraph from the essay. It's gone. Adios. See you later. Don't let the backspace key miss you on the way out the door.

Now that we have settled that little faux pas, how are we going to present that information?

Think...What do I know about the conventions of feature articles. You know it might help if you provided a little assistance here?

I have it. Instead of listing the conventions in the essay we can make them an insert in the article—you know those

cute little boxes that break up the text and serve this exact purpose. Now that we have sidestepped that mine perhaps I can stop all of this foolishness and get back to business.

Oh but wait, I haven't even touched on the way feature articles make use of visuals to add coherence, unity and appeal. And then there is the use of white space.

Ok, calm down. We can do this. Yes, it seems overwhelming at first, but as Hansel said to Gretel "Wait, when the moon comes up I will be able to see the crumbs of bread that I scattered, and they will show us the way back home."

Texts leave bread crumbs too. And it turns out that following those bread crumbs, understanding how they function and adhering to them, not only produces a successful text but it gets you home a lot faster.

Did you see that? Brilliant.

Absolutely Brilliant.

