



*The PR Newswire*  
*Guide to **Writing** a Feature*





## *About the PR Newswire Feature News Service*

PR Newswire transmits more than 1,600 features annually, both on a standalone basis and in 135 themed packages that are archived in the company's media-only newsroom.

The Feature News Service also offers clients complimentary counseling on their features, providing ideas on writing, editing and how to increase the media's interest in the copy.

To learn more, visit <http://www.prnewswire.com/features> or contact [featuredesk@prnewswire.com](mailto:featuredesk@prnewswire.com).

## *Table of Contents*

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Introduction: What Is A Feature?.....   | 2  |
| Headlines and Leads.....  | 3  |
| Resting a Feature on the Second Paragraph.....                                  | 6  |
| He Said, She Said: Getting the Right Quote .....                                | 7  |
| Specifics About Specifics: How To Get Into Detail.....                          | 8  |
| Filling in the Blanks In Your Big Picture.....                                  | 9  |
| Wrapping Up .....   | 10 |
| Knowing When To Stop.....   | 11 |
| Special Topics:<br>The Holiday Feature .....                                    | 12 |
| Writing About an Event:<br>Making People Care About It Even When It's Over..... | 14 |
| When To Send A Feature .....  | 15 |
| Adding a Photo.....   | 16 |



## *Introduction: What Is A Feature?*

When you read a newspaper, a lot of what's on the front pages is usually breaking news, information that needs to be told right away, or it will be dated and lose its relevance. Not so a feature.

If done right, a feature can be evergreen; that is, it can have an indefinite shelf life that will enable it to be used when it is needed, and is not reliant on when it is sent out. Items on such topics as food, travel, pets, home improvement and health, for example, lend themselves well to this kind of treatment.

**The more you write a feature so it can be used any time of the year, the greater your chances of being picked up by broadcast, print and online media.**

Features are often about how we live, love, and learn. While the news of the day is of vital importance, many people seek a respite from grim headlines and need useful information relevant to their home and family. That's where a feature comes in.

While a feature may look like a press release when it is transmitted, the two have some important distinctions.

A traditional press release is better for breaking news, which people need to know right away.

Unlike a press release, a feature is intended for verbatim use, as if a journalist could have written the item. That means it needs to emphasize information over outright promotion. To accommodate verbatim use, it is crucial for features to be concise, no more than about 400 words. Beyond that length, you reach a point of diminishing returns with most media, and features will be either cut for space or not used at all. There are exceptions, now and then, but you shouldn't count on being one of them.

Do it right and you have more chances than ever to get noticed by the media, which have limited resources for staff, freelancers and syndicates for features. If you can provide quality material for free, that will go a long way toward getting into print or on the air.

Even if your feature doesn't get used word for word, journalists may look to you as a source for their own articles if they view you as providing credible information in your feature.

There is no one right way to go about this. However, the following paragraph-by-paragraph breakdown of a feature's most crucial ingredients can serve as a useful template. The more comfortable you are writing a feature, the easier it will be to tailor it to your own preferences.

## *Writing a Feature*

### **Grab Them Now Or Lose Them Forever: The Importance of a Good Headline**

The headline is, in many ways, the most important part of your feature.

In newsrooms, time is always in short supply. Your headline will be one of hundreds editors scan daily. You may only have 10 seconds or less to convince an editor to open up the full story.

If editors take that crucial step and click to the full text, you will have cleared the most important hurdle. If not, you've lost them forever and they will find something else that intrigues them. It's that simple.

Treat the headline more like a summary of the feature, in 20 words or less. It may look and read differently from headlines you see in newspapers and magazines. That's OK. Your objective is to provide information.



In looking for stories of interest, journalists are, in effect, asking you, why is this story important? How will it be of interest to my readers or listeners?

The successful headline answers those questions by telling the reader what's new, different or useful.

**Think of the headline as if you met a friend on the street and he asked you what your feature was about. If you read them the headline, the answer should be apparent.**

Read the headline to a colleague or family member. If you see them scratching their head, then it's back to the drawing board. Your intent needs to be clear.

Some other headline highlights:

- ✦ Use short words and sentences, e.g. "Man Bites Dog, Dog Bites Back."
- ✦ Try writing the headline before you write the story. Often times, that helps you figure out what to put in the lead paragraph.
- ✦ Don't automatically put a brand or client name in the headline unless it's one everyone knows and will get people's attention by virtue of that name. Instead, dwell on what's most intriguing about the product, place, event or person you're writing about.

## The Need For A Good Lead

Gone are the days when even the most inveterate news hounds have the time to read a newspaper or magazine cover to cover. Instead, we scan a page looking for things of interest.

A good headline catches the reader's attention. But once that grabs a reader, you have to hold onto them with a strong lead paragraph, which

must challenge or intrigue from the get-go. Editors won't wade through four or five paragraphs to determine what the feature is really about. Like you, they just don't have the time.

As with the headline, don't feel compelled to put a brand name in the lead unless it's crucial to the story. Rather, use this precious space to zero in on the story angle you want the reader to focus on.

You can even think of a lead as an extended version of the headline, even using some of the same wording, if you wish. While it's important to write copy so it can be used verbatim, there is no expectation a headline will be used that way. The headline you write will serve more as a story abstract, and you can expect that a publication will write its own headline to fit its allotted space.

When writing a lead:

- ✦ Remember, trim is in, stout is out. Most newspaper paragraphs are short — two to three sentences tops, no more than 35 words or so.
- ✦ Keep it simple. Subject, verb, object. You're done. Throw in an adjective if necessary. Otherwise, be miserly with your words. Treat them like pearls, carefully chosen, carefully worn.
- ✦ Steer clear of superlatives. Telling a reader something is "revolutionary," "ideal," "unique" or "perfect," is a perfectly ideal way to ensure your feature is bound for the compost heap. If what you are writing about is indeed special, that should be apparent from the feature without your having to say so.
- ✦ Don't forget, you're writing an article, not a commercial. If it reads like an advertisement, it will be treated as such. You will achieve the promotion you seek by being a good, credible source of information.



- ✦ Beware of the question or quote lead. They tend to slow down a story, and serve more as a crutch than a hook. Better to write a straight lead and answer those questions right away.

## Resting a Feature on the Second Paragraph

Sure, it's below the lead, but the second paragraph is of first importance.

It serves to authenticate the story and reinforce and expand the premise in the lead. A great way to achieve this is by identifying the source of the copy, if you haven't already done so in the lead.

**Attribution is something that cannot be treated casually. Readers and editors both need to know up front who put out the feature.**

Burying the attribution in the text gives the impression you have something to hide. Also, if the article is shortened due to space limitations, having the source I.D. up high ensures there is no confusion about who provided the copy.

The source I.D. needn't be a drawn-out affair. It could be something as simple as "says Joe Cool, president of the Air Conditioning Institute," or "according to experts at XY Corp." No need to go into ponderous detail about a product line or the company's standing in the marketplace. You've done what you had to do.

Think of the first two paragraphs as a team. If done right, they could even serve as a brief, column item or filler if a newspaper or magazine had limited space. That is why this paragraph is also a good place to include a mention of a Web site address, so if the article is shortened, readers still have a place to go for more information.

## He Said, She Said: Getting The Right Quote

The third paragraph is often a great place for a quote. What comes before lays out the premise of a feature. A quote can then lend authority to an article, introduce an expert and further advance the story.

The quote can introduce personal feelings, comments and opinion. If you wish to include superlatives in a feature, they are best used inside a quote.

Ideally, the spokesperson quoted should be someone who not only is knowledgeable on the subject, but would be available for interviews should a journalist be inspired to write his/her own article. Tantalizing reporters with a dynamite quote but then depriving them of that person will put you on their do-not-call list.

Use your best quote first. That may sound painfully evident, but some people are tempted to wrap up their feature with something meaningful or even profound. There's no need. Assume editors won't get to the bottom of the feature. Hit them with the good stuff right away.

You can also use the quote to provide information on the spokesperson and his relation to the company as well as details about the company itself. You could then flesh out even more details in subsequent quotes.

For example, at the end of the paragraph before the quote, you first say "according to Jane Jones, a retail expert." At the end of the quote itself, you could add, "says Jones, president of Acme Retail Consultants." If you include another quote, you could then say, "notes Jones, who has advised Macy's, Target and other retail chains on holiday sales."

It's also best to start the quote with the quote itself. Introduce who is talking later. Beginning a sentence with "According to" will only slow down the well-oiled machine that is becoming your feature.



Similarly, if your quote runs two sentences, consider inserting the name of the speaker in between the sentences so you finish up with the quote and leave more of an impression.

But beware:

- ✦ **Don't quote just for the sake of quoting.** If a person has something to say that conveys color and opinion and helps the reader understand the feature better, then fine. If not, use the space for something else or simply paraphrase.
- ✦ **Avoid bad quotes.** Make sure they are in a more conversational style and do not merely cite facts or figures, or it will reflect badly on you and the person being quoted.
- ✦ **Steer clear of repetition.** A good quote moves the story forward. It never delays or sidetracks.
- ✦ **No jargon.** More often than not, you're reaching a general audience. Assume limited knowledge and have experts speak in lay terms.

### Specifics About Specifics: How To Get Into Detail

If done right, a feature could essentially end after the third paragraph, as it will have delivered the most important information by then. But let's work from the assumption that an editor has more space and needs more from you.

Think of a feature, for a moment, as you would a dinner. The first two paragraphs are the meat, which has been spiced up by the quote. The following paragraphs are your side dishes, which make for a complete, and hopefully, satisfying meal.

Here is where you transition into details, to develop the story further and convince the editor to use more of the story and the reader to not turn the page just yet. But remember to provide those details concisely.

Editors will want to know more, but only to a point. Among the ways to do that:

- ✦ Use bullet points instead of numbers if you're providing tips or advice. For readers and editors scanning copy, this can get their attention and draw them into the story.
- ✦ Bullets make the story easier to edit if the story has to be cut for space and editors want to move around information. Top 10 lists may be tempting but many publications may have to stop before 10.
- ✦ Provide details about how a product works here, rather than trying to fit that information at the top. If no explanation is necessary, use the space to tell what is different or how it will benefit the reader.
- ✦ If it's a human-interest story or profile, fill in the blanks with some of the biographical information you have not yet mentioned.
- ✦ After providing details, you may want to consider providing another quote, either from the person quoted earlier or somebody new. Indeed, third-party endorsements often work best here. You don't want them too high up in the story raving about a product when you haven't really told yet what that product does. Now's the time to let the quotable be quoted.

### Filling in the Blanks In Your Big Picture

One way to help make your feature more relatable to a variety of audiences is to clue readers into the fact that what you're talking about may affect many people.



For example, if you were to say “20 million people suffer daily from the heartbreak of psoriasis,” that’s certainly worthy of mention. It highlights a problem and lets readers know that if they suffer from the same malady they have plenty of company. But in this instance, the point of the feature is how a product or person can address the problem of psoriasis, not that 20 million people suffer from it.

**While it is important to hit readers with a statistic that offers context for your story, it is best offered further down in a feature.**

When using numbers, it’s important to remember that a feature could be seen anywhere in the world once it’s transmitted or posted on the Internet. So, if you said 20 million Americans have psoriasis, that may be correct, but it’s not sufficiently inclusive. Media in other countries may be interested in your feature, but may be less inclined to use it if they sense this is a story only applicable to Americans. If you’re dealing with a health topic, for instance, that would almost never be the case.

Better then, to say “at least 20 million people” have psoriasis. When using statistics or other important information, it’s best to use broad strokes in your copy to make it accessible to the widest possible audience.

## Wrapping Up

You may have more to add to in your feature. Or not. First, determine whether you have said all that needs to be said. Second, figure out whether there is anything essential you need to include that validates what was said above.

If so, you can include that information in the final paragraphs, along with telling readers how to get a product and its cost. It’s also fine to include here another mention of a Web site URL.

Again, don’t feel a need to come up with anything meaningful or profound. Editors only want facts, not fluff. If you’ve said all you’ve had to say, then call it a day.

In contrast to a press release, a feature will almost never have forward-looking statements that trigger disclaimers that both company lawyers and the government require. You are simply providing information about a product, place or person based on already-public information that in no way will affect a stock’s price.

Do not include boilerplate paragraphs in a feature just because you insert them in press releases as a matter of course. Features serve a different purpose and audience.

The same goes for corporate identity statements. However, if the statement contains information that makes the feature more relevant, then include it in the story. Don’t stick it at the bottom, which is a red flag to journalists telling them to ignore this information altogether, which they will. Otherwise, keep these statements short — a sentence or two tops. It’s all you need and is about what journalists will tolerate.

## Knowing When To Stop

It’s no accident that throughout, we’ve talked about the need to keep your feature concise. That approach not only helps the media, but may be the sole factor that determines whether your feature is picked up.

**Most newspapers and magazines have limited space allotted to news and features. That means being economical with your words is not only desirable, but essential.**

That’s why a good length to aim for is in the neighborhood of 400 words, which is what most publications can reasonably handle.



A space-starved editor confronted with a long feature may simply lop off a chunk from the bottom. Less likely, the editor will dive into the feature and figure out what works best. More likely, the same editor will discard the feature and look for one that will take less time to deal with.

If you would like to provide more information, perhaps offer a longer version of the article on a Web site, or provide links to topics touched on in the feature, so you don't have to fit everything into the story itself.

Think of a feature as you would a tree, which grows and looks best when it's pruned regularly. Prune your story of excess words and you will not only be helping the media do its job more efficiently, but you will be increasing the chance of more people reading and hearing your feature. In the end, that's all that really matters.

## *Special Topics*

### **The Holiday Feature: How To Provide Editors With The Gift Of Useable Copy**

Features linked to holidays are among those most coveted by editors. They are of interest to the overwhelming majority of readers, listeners and viewers. That means the same time every year, the media is eagerly on the hunt for quality copy. Don't disappoint them.

The calendar may be predictable, but that does not mean your feature has to be. In fact, it shouldn't, to have any chance of consideration. That means banishing from your copy the tried and true, namely the familiar holiday symbols and clichés that send editors scurrying for the delete button.

While you're at it, break up with Cupid, don't be a turkey about what you put in your Thanksgiving feature and don't mention tricks or treats if you want your Halloween feature to stand a ghost of a chance.

Bah, humbug? You bet. Here's why: Editors are deluged with copy to consider for the limited space in holiday special sections, gift guides and the like. They don't want to run 20 stories that lead off with variations on Kris Kringle jingling all the way and making lists that are checked twice.

Your best chance of getting noticed, then, is to provide copy that rises above the mountain of bromides, shopworn phrases and lack of originality the media will be confronted with.

For example, if you are doing a gift story, just stick to talking about the product. There is no need to dress it up further. By not mentioning a holiday you can then allow your feature to become evergreen — its most important quality.

Instead of starting a story with "For the man/woman/child/dog who has everything, give", instead provide a gift to the editor who has everything but well-written copy.

If you are writing about something that you believe is revolutionary and innovative, let the reader draw that conclusion from what you convey about how the product is better or easier to use. If you absolutely, positively, must have a superlative in your story, make sure it's in a quote.

Presumably, a gift that's good for the December holidays would be also nice to have for Valentine's Day, graduation or Father's Day. If you peg a feature solely to Christmas, then it's dead in the water on Dec. 26.

**By not dating a feature, you not only broaden its appeal, but you increase its shelf life indefinitely.**

Yes, there are exceptions. Sometimes an event or product is tied directly to a holiday. If you're writing a story about fireworks safety, it's a good idea to peg it to the Fourth of July. If you want to expand upon the meaning of Kwanzaa, nobody will be running that copy in the spring.



But like with any feature, holiday copy needs to emphasize information over outright promotion. You're getting it right if you avoid being trite. So much of the copy the media gets will not follow that rule and is doomed to failure.

Avoiding the minefields that can make holiday features so perilous to navigate can translate into clips, interviews and increased business, the ingredients that make for a truly happy holiday no matter what time of year.

### **Writing About An Event: Making People Care About It Even When It's Over**

Promoting an event can be daunting. It's easy to get trampled by the march of time, especially when trying to get coverage for a particular event. But there is a way to promote an event in advance and at the same time craft a timeless feature to give editors maximum flexibility in how to handle your story.

It could be the story the speaker at an event has to tell. Or maybe it's the cause of the event, such as an award recipient or paper being presented.

Here's where parentheses become your savior, allowing you to include information that can be easily edited out if the story is read after the event takes place. For example, "Sam Smith (in remarks prepared for the National Blacksmith Association meeting on Oct. 25) says he's lucky that horseshoe demand has remained steady."

Take out what's in the parentheses and you still have a valid statement. Or use what's inside if the event hasn't yet happened. Either way, it's a win-win for editors.

**Too often, there are artificial events created to interest the media that are instead usually a turnoff.**

Do we really care about National Ingrown Toenail Awareness Week? There are literally hundreds of these "weeks" and "months," few of which the media will actually pay attention to.

Don't peg your feature to these occasions. Perhaps mention it in the headline or in the text (in parentheses, of course), but don't date your feature by making it the point of the article. November may be National Diabetes Month, for example, but people suffer from diabetes year-round and always need the latest information on the disease.

An exception is when your observance is sufficiently out of the mainstream that its very name will get journalists to sit up and take notice. If you're celebrating National Underwear Day by having 20 models walk around Times Square in their boxers and bras, then that's the story in itself, although you should probably keep it brief.

### **When To Send A Feature**

Most newspaper feature sections are planned at least three weeks in advance. That means they're done pondering Valentine's Day during the January thaw, and they wind up contemplating what they're putting out for Thanksgiving right around Halloween.

**Planning ahead is not only a good idea, it's just about the only way to ensure features are considered by journalists.**

Editors simply don't use spot copy on feature topics. They don't need to, as they will likely have had enough to choose from by the time their deadlines roll around. It's vital that your copy be there before that happens. So, if the feature is tied to a particular event, holiday or observance, plan on getting it to the media at least a month before.



The situation is even more acute when trying to reach long-lead magazines—those that come out monthly or less often—many of which work 3-5 months ahead of time. It might be August, but many titles are locking up their December books by then. Take time out from your tan to get your copy in, especially for gift items, or it will be a very cold winter indeed.

### **Adding A Photo**

Sometimes, no matter how compelling or well-written a feature might be, words alone just aren't enough. Indeed, adding a photo or graphic to accompany the feature can go a long way toward ensuring pickup.

Let's say you were doing a food feature that included a recipe. Providing a photo of the completed recipe allows you to show what home chefs can aspire to and inspire a lot of interest if not futility in the kitchen.

Or maybe you're writing about a new Caribbean resort. It's one thing to talk about its over-the-top amenities. But readers and editors want some evidence you can back up your words with a dazzling image to match.

By providing a photo, you are helping editors do two things. First, you are aiding them in better explaining the story to readers. Sometimes, no matter how thorough your description, it's hard to get a handle on what something looks like. A photo resolves that dilemma and can also draw readers into the story who are scanning pages for something of interest.

Second, you make it easier for editors to do their job, by giving them more material to fill available space. If editors have two similar stories, one with a photo, one without, chances are they will take the former. You've provided a complete package, and have precluded the need for editors to find their own image.

A photo is also useful when trying to reach broadcast journalists, as seeing the photo can prompt a TV producer to book a segment on a

news program or talk show. It can even be the launching point to give a radio interviewer something to talk about. Providing an image lets them contemplate how they could package your material for their show, which text alone might not allow.

**Consider a photo or graphic to be an integral part of your feature, not a frill that can be spared if budgets get squeezed.**

Your competition for journalists' attention is stiff, and you need all the help you can get to rise above the pack clamoring for attention.



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