UNIT 2 FEATURE WRITING

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2.0 INTRODUCTION

This is the second unit in this block. The first unit has acquainted you with the fundamentals of good writing. The subsequent units will deal with opinion and editorial writing, and freelance and magazine writing.

The second unit deals with feature writing. Until independence in 1947, Indian newspapers, being preoccupied with political affairs with particular emphasis on the struggle for freedom, devoted little space to features. Even today, political coverage remains their staple diet, with a curious obsession with speeches of political leaders not only in the central and state legislatures but also at public functions, rallies and press conferences.

Even so, more and more editors have begun to pay attention to features which give individuality and character to a newspaper and offer a greater variety of reading material to the subscriber.

If news is the lifeblood of a newspaper, editorials are its heart and features its soul. Features usually play up the human interest angle.
2.1 OBJECTIVES

This unit is aimed at helping you to appreciate the importance of features in the contents of a newspaper and acquaint you with the technique of feature writing. At the end of your study of the unit, you should be able to:

- describe the essential ingredients that go to make a feature;
- distinguish between different types of features;
- write a good feature; and
- evaluate a feature and point out the strong and weak aspects of it.

Besides the qualities required of a good reporter (news sense, leg work, fidelity to truth, knowledge of current affairs and an ability to ferret out the facts and present them in a logical and attractive manner), the feature writer should have an excellent command over the language in which he writes. A feature needs a style. The choice of words should be such as to impart 'colour' to the story, evoke a mood or a feeling or give a vivid picture of a person, place or thing. So if you have the qualities mentioned above, you can hope to be a good feature writer. This unit is designed to help you in this task.

Activity 1

At this point, it would be a good idea to involve ourselves in an activity. At the beginning of this unit, we have mentioned that the newspapers are still obsessed with political news and their interpretations. But slowly, features on topics other than political in nature, are increasingly appearing in our newspapers. Acquaint yourself with this slow change.

- Take the last seven editions of the newspaper (one) you subscribe to
- List down the headings/titles of the feature articles published in these editions
- Categories these under different themes (political, economical, environmental, women issues etc.)
- See what a variety of features are being published by the newspapers for the readers.

2.2 MAIN COMPONENTS OF A FEATURE

A feature resembles a news story in some respects but differs from it in some others. Like a news story, a feature deals with facts. But it differs from a news story in that it may be longer than its news value justifies and it need not follow the standard form of news presentation. A news story has two main components — the lead and the body. A feature also has a third component — the conclusion. The lead should consist of a summary of the subject matter. The body should elaborate on it and the conclusion should sum it up or draw a moral from it. The feature writer has far greater flexibility than a news reporter.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: i) Answer the following questions in the space provided below.
ii) Compare your answer with the ones given at the end of this unit.
1) Why do you think that the features express the soul of a newspaper?

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2.2.1 The Lead

A feature writer has great latitude in selecting his lead. The choice is indeed limitless. The lead may be any one of the following types or a combination of two or more of them.

2.2.1.1 News Summary Lead

This is similar to the lead in a news story and should ideally embody the five Ws — Who, What, Where, When, and Why.

Example: When the Congress Working Committee’s meeting in New Delhi on Monday resulted in a deadlock over the membership issue between the conservatives and the liberals, the party president on his own decided to seek the advice of the Supreme Court on the matter. He thus brought to an end the bitter acrimony between the rival factions that had threatened to cause a split in the party.

2.2.1.2 Short Sentence Lead

This consists of a single striking sentence.

Examples:
- I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth.
- My father was a versatile man.
- Charlie Chaplin’s genius was in comedy.
- Choice often breeds life, when order breeds habit.
- Art is born of humiliation.
- Life is an abnormal business.
- Time goes by.

2.2.1.3 Quotation Lead

The sayings of a renowned person, poet or leader may be taken as a lead.

Example:
- To be or not to be.
- A joke is an epitaph on an emotion.
- Adversity introduces a man to himself.
- Necessity is the mother of invention.
- East is East and West is West.
2.2.1.4 Question Lead

Sometimes a question may provide a feature with an attractive lead.

Examples:
- How much is a wife worth?
- Aren't bad laws the worst sort of tyranny?
- Does life imitate art?
- Is the earth really round?

2.2.1.5 Contrast Lead

Conflict and contrast many a times provide a feature with lead which may bring forth the controversial nature of the feature.

Example: The economic situation looked quite rosy a year ago. Today it fills us with gloom and foreboding.

2.2.1.6 Picture Lead

This gives a vivid description of the setting of the feature or evokes a mood or feeling.

Example: By the time I crossed the frontier from Mongolia into Irkutsk the temperature was so low that you would have required to get down on your hands and knees to see it. I had not thought it possible anywhere on the inhabited earth to be so cold.

Example: India looks like beautiful bride with a veil over her head when viewed from space. This is how Soviet cosmonaut V.V. Volyn saw India from his spacecraft while orbiting the earth.

2.2.1.7 Humorous Lead

A humourous lead sets the tone of a feature perfectly for the reader.

Example: Long experience has taught me that in Bombay nobody goes to the theatre unless he or she has bronchitis.

Activity 2

You have now learned that a feature can have different types of lead expressing the theme. A crisp and well written lead sets the tone of a feature. Many times, the lead attracts the readers.

In Activity 1, you have categorised some features under different themes. In this activity, you may concentrate on the lead of these features. Categorise these leads under various types as discussed in the previous section and sub-sections. Reason out as to why you find some leads more attractive than others.

2.2.2 The Body

Feature writing is not very different from any other expository or narrative writing. The body of a feature is developed logically and smoothly in the same way as a news story. A feature should conform to the basic principles of good writing, that is, unity, coherence, and readability. Although the feature writer may have a greater space at his disposal than a reporter, he should present his material with brevity and elegance, avoiding superfluous words as well as cliches and maintaining a high standard of writing. By exercising literary ingenuity, the feature writer can make even a simple and ordinary incident into a vital happening. The news reporter informs but the feature writer informs, entertains and educates.

2.2.3 The Conclusion

A news report does not need a conclusion, but a feature often, though not always, does. The conclusion may be a summing up of the contents of a feature, or a climax as in a short story or a cutback or a flashback to the lead.
Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Answer the following questions in the space provided below.

   ii) Compare your answers with the ones given at the end of this unit.

1) What is a lead?

2) Explain the following in one sentence each.

   News summary lead:

   Picture lead:

   Quotation lead:

2.3 DIFFERENT TYPES OF FEATURES

There is hardly a subject on which a feature cannot be written. A boy trying to cross a busy street, a cat wanting to catch an elusive rat, a nurse at work in a hospital, a vegetable vendor in your street, men and women practising unusual professions, personal accounts of travel, reminiscences of the past — in fact, any subject can be turned into a feature. A feature has no specific length. It can be as short as four paragraphs or as long as 40 paragraphs. The list of different types of features given below must, therefore, be seen as a highly tentative one.

2.3.1 Human Interest Features

The human touch is perhaps the most vital quality in the feature.

Example: An exciting new life will begin for three-year-old Indira from Andhra Pradesh when she flies to Beirut with her French foster mother, Miss Eliane Magnam, a musician, on Tuesday. Indira had been left in the care of a children’s home in Hyderabad by her unknown mother without a stitch on her body or a name to go by. But, unlike other unfortunate foundlings, she will escape a life of want and drudgery. Fate has been kind to her.

2.3.2 Personal Narratives

The stories of eminent men and women are worth telling. Human interest in them survives long after they are dead. Features can be written on their life and work, their achievements and their unique contribution to the nation.
2.3.3 Meeting Unusual People

The world is full of extraordinary persons whose life and work can make good features.

An example was a feature on a German couple, Heribert and Maike Frank, whose chance encounter with a craftsman in Mysore led them to quit their plum jobs and create a 'little India' in their home town of Munchen.

2.3.4 Travel Sketches

Travel fascinates most people even though they may be prevented by lack of money or time from visiting as many places as they may want to. Travel features satisfy a basic human desire to know more about the world we live in.

Example: After a three-hour drive along winding mountain roads, with deep valleys on one side and huge menacing boulders jutting out of the rocks on the other, we arrived at snow-covered Nathu La to be greeted by the thin fleeting cloud of mist. The cloud passed by swiftly to reveal three Chinese climbing down the slope on the other side of the barbed wire-fence put up by our troops to demarcate the boundary.

2.3.5 Historical Features

These are about persons in history books or about historical places.

Example: Mysore lives in its fabled past. The history of the city takes off from a fort that Bettada Chamaraja Wodeyar, a feudatory of the Vijayanagara empire, build in 1584. He called the settlement 'Mahisura Nagar', which meant capital town. Another line of thought is that the city got its name from the legendary demon, Mahisha, vanquished by the goddess Chamundeswari, who now presides over Mysore from the top of a hill...

2.3.6 Interpretative Features

These are intended to inform and instruct the reader about the background and significance of political, economic, social and religious issues.

2.3.7 Autobiographical Human Documents

Features in this category relate to personal experiences of intimate personal matters.

Most of us have read 'My Experiment with Truth'. It is a wonderful account of the personal experiences of Mahatma Gandhi.

2.3.8 Science Features

Features to popularise science by explaining a scientific development in simple language for the lay reader fall into this group.

2.3.9 Practical Guidance Features

These are designed to tell the reader how to make, repair or collect things. Short of do-it-yourself articles.

2.3.10 Miscellaneous

The list of subjects that lend themselves to feature treatment is endless, ranging from mundane activities like cooking and gardening to unusual trades and professions, from fashions and good grooming to bird-watching and mountaineering.

Unusual Professions

A series on unusual or dying professions including the puppeteer fallen on bad days, the leech doctor who may well claim to be a precursor of the modern surgeon, the street juggler and so on.

Ambassador of Songs From Japan

An example of my features: A handsome young Japanese wearing a striped cotton coat, dark
trousers and a big garland of jasmine entered the lobby of a New Delhi hotel. At the reception counter he freed his right hand in which he carried a musical instrument, sniffed at the flowers and remarked with obvious delight: “very nice, very nice.”

‘Your Delhi is a beautiful City’, he said to me as he settled down a few minutes later in his fifth floor room.

**Russian Poet**

A feature about a poetry reading by the well-known Russian writer, Evgeny Evtushenko during a visit to Delhi began: A tall, wiry man enters a smallish room crowded with poets, novelists, critics and journalists. He has a thin crop of light brown hair and his handsome face is lit with a pleasant smile. He is cheerful, well groomed and dressed in a neat warm suit. He can be mistaken for a film star, but he is a poet, one of Russia’s brilliant young poets.

Before reciting his poems, Evtushenko tells the audience how an accident made him realise a dream he has cherished since childhood — the dream of visiting India.

**Visiting an Iranian City under Iraqi Occupation during the War**

A despatch sent to ... ‘Times of India’ from Baghdad during the early phase of the Iran-Iraq war: From Basra we crossed the concrete bridge over the Shatt-Al-Arab waterway and travelled for about 30 kilometers on an ill — maintained road to reach the former Iranian town of Khoramshahr. In Persian, Khoramshahr means ‘joyous city’. It has certainly brought much joy to its Iraqi conquerers but not to its original inhabitants who have had to flee the town. Many of them obviously left in a hurry. The dinner still rotting on a table in a deserted house, women’s dresses hanging in the wardrobe, curtain swaying in the wind, baby dolls lying scattered in the rubble, bric-a-brac once lovingly collected and albums of photographs of a family from childhood through marriage to middle age provide evidence of the tragic flight. Two cats, looking lean and hungry, sit sadly by a bucketful of stale bread, perhaps waiting for their mistress. A solitary dog stands sentinel at a workshop for its master to return. The war has played havoc with the city and most of its houses have been rendered unfit for human habitation.

**Zoo Story**

Two coy, gentle brides arrived in New Delhi from Tokyo by air on Tuesday to bring cheer and joy to a couple of lonely bridegrooms in the zoo. The bridegrooms — two male Sika Deer — came from Japan some years ago and, though they had been provided with local mates, they were not quite happy with them.

**Encounter in the Wild West**

This was the title of the piece the author J.D. Singh, sent from Los Angeles during his travels through the United States. For reasons of space it has been condensed from the original.

From the Yellowstone National park where I spent three delightful days, the bus brought us to Livingston in the mid-western state of Montana. My train was to leave in the afternoon, so I decided to pass the time window shopping.

But there was not much window shopping one could do in Livingston, a small town of less than 10,000 souls. In half an hour I had the run of the entire shopping centre and when I chanced upon a bar sign I involuntarily pushed the door and went in.

The bar was a good-sized hall but it was dark and dingy even at noon. Four pairs of eyes turned on me as I entered. On the bar sat rough-hewn characters, with unshaven chins and soiled shirts, looking as if they have just come back from a John Wayne film set.

My first instinct was to run away. But I summoned up the courage and went to the bar and ordered a beer.

‘Which one?’ the old bar maid asked, ‘Hamma’. I replied, “twenty-five Cents”,’ she said.

I gave her a dollar bill and she returned the change. The men’s eyes were still fixed on me, and they did not look very friendly. The silence was killing me.

I turned to the man on my left and pointing to his giant tumbler of beer remarked: ‘I won’t be able to drink that much.’
The man laughed and said: 'Oh, you can. I have had three already'.

The ice was now broken and the three characters moved, towards me and were gradually joined in by half a dozen others. It soon turned into an animated, friendly group in a lively conversation on subjects ranging from snake-charmers to Hollywood movies.

After having consumed several more bottles of beer, I turned to the barmaid and asked: 'How much do I owe you?' 'You owe me nothing', she said. 'The beer has been paid for by your friends'.

I was deeply touched, but more was to come. As I got up to go, the whole tipsy crowd insisted on giving me a lift to the railway station. I said I would walk, but they would not listen and put me into a limousine which was soon racing through the town's paved streets in a zig-zag manner, with its occupants lustily singing: 'For he's a Jolly Good Fellow!'

Activity 3

I am sure, it must have been interesting reading this unit so far. We all have very rewarding experiences, come across people who are lovely, some not so lovely ... etc.

Now, you may try to write a short feature on any topic/subject/incident which is very close to your heart.

- Take a piece of paper and write the points you would like to elaborate on. You may restrict your feature to six paragraphs.
- Do not try to clutter your feature with too many ideas. Choose the most important or lovely ones.
- After having decided on the points, take a new piece of paper and start writing.
- After writing the piece, keep it for a day or two. Later rewrite and revise your feature. Who knows it may become a publishable one.

2.4 TECHNIQUE OF FEATURE WRITING

There are no rigid or inflexible rules about feature writing except that the feature writer must know how to collect the necessary information and present it in an attractive and readable manner. He/she should be more reflective than a news reporter, use his/her imagination. He/she must not, however, confuse feature writing with fiction writing. A feature is based on solid facts and only in the manner in which it is presented does the writer exercise his/her imagination.

The feature writer may take recourse to humour where necessary but in doing so he/she must not cross the boundary of good taste and decency. Indeed taste is the operative word when it comes to light writing.

We might remember Thackeray's advice:

Ah, ye knights of the pen;
May honour be your shield and
Truth tip your lances!
Be gentle to all people.
Be modest to women.
Be tender to children.
And as for the ogre humbug,
Out sword and at him.
Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Answer the following questions in the space provided below.
ii) Compare your answers with the ones given at the end of this unit.

1) What is the difference between an ‘autobiographical’ feature and ‘personal narrative’ feature?

2) What are the main elements which are focussed on by a feature writer while sharpening the techniques of feature writing?

2.5 LET US SUM UP

Feature articles have a special place in a newspaper. During pre-independence time, features were not given any importance. Later during the first few decades of our independences the subject matter of features was mainly confined to politics. But, now, the newspaper present features in greater number and on a variety of topics.

The main component of a feature are: i) lead, ii) body, and iii) conclusion. The news is the life blood of a newspaper, the editorials its heart and the features its soul.

The lead is like an introduction to the topics .... usually written as a summary of the main subject matter of the feature. The lead could be written in various ways. Some have been explained in this unit. We may recollect only the types of lead we have discussed in this unit.

- News summary lead
- Short sentence lead
- Question lead
- Contrast lead
- Picture lead
- Humorous lead

The feature can be of different types depending on the subject matter it discusses. They could be any of the following:

- Human interest
- Personal narratives
- Unusual encounter
- Travel
- Historical
- Interpretative
- Autobiographical
- Science
- Guidance and
Micellaneous

To write a feature, the author must be true to the facts. He/she must weave the facts with imagination. Use lucid style and narrate the whole thing in simple language. Writing, rewriting and revising form the way to arrive at an acceptable feature.

2.6 KEY WORDS

Angle : aspect of a feature or new story
Exclusive : a story published by only one newspaper.
Lead : introduction to a feature
Leg work : going out to collect material for the feature

2.7 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS : MODEL ANSWERS

1) The features published in a newspaper focus on the main interest and concern of a newspaper. Most of the newspapers publish the same news items with minor variations. But, the character and humane side of a newspaper are found in a feature. And hence, the features are called the soul of the newspapers.

2) A feature writer must have
   - the ability to collect, categorise and analyse facts;
   - a strong command on the language; and
   - a lucid style of presenting his/her thoughts and feelings.

3) a) False
   b) True
   c) False

Check Your Progress 2

1) A lead is a summary of the main points of a feature. In short it gives the essence of what would be discussed in detail in a feature.

2) News Summary Lead : Is a lead which summarises like that of a news lead giving information regarding 5Ws and one H.
   Picture Lead : Is a lead which gives a vivid description of a place or incident or the background of a feature as if the reader is viewing a picture.
   Quotation Lead : Is a lead which through a quotation from an eminent poet or an author or a leader may very well summarise the main content of the feature.

Check Your Progress 3

1) An 'autobiographical' feature is the personal experiences enumerated by the person himself where as a 'personal narrative' feature is a feature written by an author on some aspects of another person.

2) - the writer should search facts;
   - employ imagination;
   - narrate the facts in lucid language; and
   - the language should be simple.