

Exercise 1: Evaluating Feature Leads

INSTRUCTIONS: Critically evaluate the following leads. Decide which topics are most interesting and which leads are most effective. As you evaluate the leads, try to formulate guidelines—"Do's and Don't's"—that you can apply to your own stories.

1. It may be one of the smallest pieces of real estate that you will ever buy, but chances are that your cemetery plot will also be the most expensive.
The price of cemetery property goes up at least 10 percent a year, said Robert Neel, president of Woodlawn Memorial Park. The current starting price for a 5- by 10-foot plot is between \$1,200 and \$1,500 at most cemeteries.
2. There was no hesitation. The bowler picked up his ball and smoothly let it roll down the alley. Nine pins fell, leaving just one standing. Alfred Hershey took careful aim and knocked that one down too.
Perfectly ordinary.
Except that Hershey is blind.
3. "How about if I just sit in the floor with you?" asked Judge Clarence Dubreff after a child complained that he "always sits higher than anybody else."
The juvenile court judge took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves and sat on the classroom floor.
4. Twenty teenagers plan their own curriculum and live and work at Freedom House School. All 20 are from welfare families, and most have police records.
5. The student governments at most universities in the state are having problems.
6. Rudy Willging, Rick Kaeppler and Don Zitto aren't foresters and don't diagnose sick trees, and they aren't firefighters in the traditional sense, but are rather a combination, intensively trained to battle forest fires, perhaps the most dangerous fires of all.
7. Pancho is a short, dark-skinned, curly-haired 20-year-old with flashing black eyes, a bouncing step and a Spanish accent.
8. "It must be the most peculiar house in the city," said Katie Erhmann.
9. David, 44, was learning to write his name. Karen, 7, repeatedly practiced buttoning her sweater. Despite the difference in their ages, they have a common plight. Both are mentally retarded.
10. Sgt. David Blaren's first and favorite assignment was at Fort Meade, Md., where he was a member of the color guard at all Washington Redskins football games. Between Fort Meade and his current assignment were 11 busy years in the U.S. Army.
11. A group of Californians, hoping to rescue the number of suicides, which some experts believe claim more lives than automobile accidents, is offering "love, concern and a sympathetic audience" for people intent on destroying themselves.
12. Almost 18,600 students are enrolled in the city's public schools, but 26 never leave home. The students are unable to attend school because of accidents and illnesses. All are tutored by three teachers from the school system's House Instruction Department.

Exercise 2: Evaluating Feature Leads

INSTRUCTIONS: Critically evaluate the following leads. Decide which topics are most interesting and which leads are most effective. As you evaluate the leads, try to formulate guidelines—"Do's and Don't's"—that you can apply to your own stories.

1. Few college students today seem to be concerned with the old adage, "You are what you eat."
2. The concept of "night watchman" has been redefined.
3. An alcoholic doesn't want to drink but cannot help himself. What can he do? Who can he turn to?
4. "As I passed the Statue of Liberty, I got a cold chill. For the first time I felt I was really alone." Henry H. Sleczkowski, 79, came to the United States in 1950 to start a new life. He had no idea he would be so successful.
5. A 19-year-old coed has an interesting, if not unusual, job.
6. Garbage, garbage everywhere, and not an end in sight.
7. Tractors filled the yard as dozens of farmers, most dressed in light denim jackets and trousers, helped harvest 155 acres of corn on the Victor Stalling farm 18 miles northwest of here.
"Thos is the custom around here," one of the farmers explained. "If somebody dies or has an accident, everyone pitches in to help."
Stalling, 47, died of a heart attack 10 days ago.
8. As couples get older, they are more likely to join a church and to attend its Sunday services.
9. The powerful role that mayors once had is declining, according to three local political figures.
10. Mrs. McNeely keeps her kitchen knives hidden under her mattress. It is a safeguard she has taken since that day her son, Joseph, threatened her husband with a bread knife.
11. Ronald Oalman is pessimistic about the future of the United States. Intermittently pounding on his desk with large, pale hands, the radio commentator explains: "No democratic republic in the history of the world has existed for 250 years. Why should we? There are too many things squeezing the middle class."
Oalman says: "The revolutionary is going to be the white, middle-class 45-year-old woman. She won't be able to get the rats out of her back yard. She won't be able to get groceries because they'll be too expensive. She won't be able to feed and clothe her children."
12. The practice of witchcraft is as old as man himself. It is called by some the "old religion." It deals with the powers of nature and the environment that can be controlled by the mind.

Exercise 3: Generating Story Ideas and Selecting a Topic

INSTRUCTIONS: One of the hardest things for a new writer to accomplish is generating story ideas. Often beginning writers say they do not know what to write about. However, in feature writing just about anything can be a topic that can interest an audience if written well. Even topics beginning writers think are mundane can be made interesting if the writer approaches the topic from a unique angle. The important thing about feature writing is to be observant and listen to people's conversations. Using the suggestions below, make a list of possible story ideas and list the sources you might use for each.

1. Walk or drive around your local community or college campus. Make a list of unusual things that you see—anything from an unusual poster or sign advertising a product or service to an unusual thing or object like an antique car. Try to list at least 10 things. From that list try to find out as much information about the things you have seen. Knock on doors of a home or business to make contacts to develop sources. For example if you see an antique or classic car sitting in a driveway, find out about the owner and see if he or she would be willing to let you write a story about the car and the owner.
2. Go to a local mall or shopping center or your student union or cafeteria and sit and observe and listen. Watch what people do, listen to what people are talking about. Make a list of possible feature stories and what might be the central point of the story. Make a list of possible sources for the story.
3. Pair up with another student and begin a conversation much like you might with any stranger. During the conversation, try to find out something interesting about the person that would make a good feature story—a trip they have taken or a project they are involved in or hobby they have. Remember that you have to find out something about them during normal conversation. You would not walk up to a stranger and say, "Tell me something interesting about yourself." Use probing questions to get the person to talk to you freely and see where the conversation goes. There is a good chance during the conversation the person will reveal something that would make an interesting story. Remember, good feature stories involve human interest.

Exercise 4: Ideas for Campus Features

INSTRUCTIONS: Here are 15 ideas for feature stories that you can write on your campus. Develop a central point for each story and a list of sources. Then interview students affected by the issues as well as authoritative sources.

1. Interview at least five faculty members who have written textbooks. Describe their experiences in writing the books as well as their work, problems and attitudes.
2. Write about your favorite teacher, a successful coach or another interesting personality on your campus. Interview other students, friends, relatives and colleagues so you have enough information for a well-rounded portrait of the person.
3. Find a campus club whose mission is to help people, such as Habitat for Humanity or Alcoholics anonymous. Interview club members about their reasons for being involved with the club and how it affects their lives.
4. What are the best part-time jobs for students on your campus? What might be the most unusual or dirtiest job? Who earns the most money and enjoys the best hours and benefits?
5. What are the best excuses faculty members hear most often from students who miss classes, assignments and tests?
6. What are students' primary health problems—physical (swine flu) or mental (stress). Or financial problems? Or housing problems? How do the students handle the problems?
7. To obtain more practical and professional experience, many students complete internships, and some students are required to do so by their major. Typically, many interns are not paid because they are getting experience they could not get elsewhere, but some times, this "free" labor can be abused by employers. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of internships and any abuses the students may have experienced during their internship.
8. What problems do international or non-traditional students (or handicapped students) face on your campus?
9. Write a historical feature that describes your college or university's founding and early years.
10. If some buildings on your campus are named after individuals, write about several of those individuals, explaining who they were and why they were honored.
11. Easy is it for the students on your campus to obtain credit cards, how many overspend and where do they find help?
12. Talk to employers who come to your campus to interview and hire graduating seniors. What do they look for in a potential employee? What common mistakes should job seekers avoid? What advice would they give students interviewing for jobs?
13. Interview and write a story about the oldest student on campus.
14. Find and write a story about a campus club that involves an element of danger, such as scuba diving, skydiving, mountain climbing, hang gliding or spelunking.
15. Write a story regarding how many students flunk out of your college or university each year. Why do they fail? Is the problem more common in some majors than others? Interview administrators and students about the issue.

Exercise 5: Writing Feature Leads

INSTRUCTIONS: First, write a straight news lead for each of the following stories. Your leads should concisely summarize each story. Second, write a feature lead for each story. Or, your instructor may ask you to write a complete feature based upon one of these sets of facts.

1. A study at the University of Michigan shatters some myths. The results were announced today. Women have a reputation for gossiping and talking, yet the study found the reputation is undeserved. The study, which required researchers to observe a number of people at work, found that women work both longer and harder than men—that men spend more time goofing off on the job. The study found that the average employed man spends 52 minutes, or 11 percent of each working day, not working: in scheduled coffee breaks, unscheduled rest breaks, at lunch beyond the normal hour and so forth. The average working woman spends only 35 minutes, or 8 percent of her working day, in such scheduled and unscheduled rest breaks. The same study found that the amount of effort expended by women at work is 112 percent that of men. The discrepancy is more dramatic than the statistics indicate because men earn more than women for the same type of work. The average man in the study earned \$13 an hour, compared to 9.34 for the average woman. The women tended to hold mainly clerical jobs, but those in managerial positions also outperformed their male counterparts.
2. Many freebies no longer are free. Because of rising expenses and other problems, American business establishments are eliminating many services and other amenities once offered their customers free of charge. Many of the services that gasoline stations used to offer for free to attract customers have gone the way of the dinosaurs—they have become extinct. Gasoline stations no longer wash windshields, and many no longer even provide the squeegee, the windshield cleaner or the towels so customers can do it themselves. One station owner said he quit offering the service because his customers reportedly were using too many cleaning towels, which cost a two cents each. Service stations have also discontinued free giveaways—free car washes with a fillup, free glasses and steak knives, free road maps—because of the increasing costs of the freebies. "We can't justify the cost of the freebies. We don't make much profit on a gallon of gas and if you start giving things away to attract customers, we end up making nothing. We found that we weren't getting enough new customers to cover the cost of the free items," said Cecil LaCette, manager of Southside Service. Some gasoline stations restrict the use of their washroom facilities and charge for the air used to inflate tires. LaCette said: "When you buy new clothes, you no longer expect to receive a free wooden or plastic hanger. When men buy a pair of slacks, alterations—which used to always be free—may cost \$10 to \$20." Along with the disappearance of those items go free gift-wrapping, which was benefit to many last-minute holiday shoppers. Coffee or soda refills, once free at many restaurants, no longer are free. And many restaurants serve water only upon request.
3. Someone called 18 people in the city last night. The caller identified himself as the president of Rutherford Ford, Inc., 2780 Doss Boulevard. He told each of the people that they had just won a new car from his dealership. Interviewed by reporters today, most of the people who received the calls said that at first they just couldn't believe it. And they were right. They couldn't. The person who called was a prankster, and Allen Rutherford, president of the dealership, says he has no idea who placed he calls, and that he's spending all his time today trying to explain the situation to those 18 people. "Someone apparently has a sick idea of humor," Rutherford said. After convincing people they had won a new car, the caller asked them to drop by the dealership this morning to pick it up. All 18 were there when the dealership opened its doors at 9 a.m. "I told them we never offered to give away a car," Rutherford said. "One woman told me she couldn't believe she'd won, and then she told me she couldn't believe it when I told her she hadn't. Two other women began to cry, and a man is threatening to sue me."
4. The police in this municipality received a call at 3:45 p.m. yesterday afternoon. A woman shouted at the sergeant who answered the telephone. She said: "My son's been beaten. His teacher whipped him this afternoon, and he's all red where she paddled him. Can teachers do that? That's assault and battery, and I want her arrested." Two police officers were sent to the home. They questioned the boy, who is 9 years old. At his mother's insistence, the police officers also inspected the boy's reported injuries. They reported: "We couldn't tell that the boy had been paddled. His fanny didn't look red to us, but we did notice that his pants legs

were wet and muddy. As we talked, it became obvious that the boy was lying. He finally admitted that he had stopped to play on the way home from school, forgot the time and got home late. He told his mother that the teacher had spanked him and kept him after school. His mother was there with us and heard the whole story. She said she'd take care of the situation, and we're quite certain that she will, as she was very embarrassed. In fact, we could hear her giving the kid a real paddling as we left—and a hard one."

5. Thomas J. Serle works for Parker Bros. Circus, which is in town this week. Performances are scheduled at 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. every day through Sunday, beginning today. Serle, who maintains a home in Fort Lauderdale, is a laborer who helps care for the animals at the circus, including 10 elephants. During a conversation with a reporter, he said: "Some people look on work with a circus as a glamorous job. It ain't. But I been doing it all my life, and it's too late for me to change. I'll be 60 next year. I was born into it. Both my folks were circus people. I started out as an acrobat until I fell and busted a leg. It never healed quite right, so they offered me this job, and I took it. What else could I do? There's all kinds of myths about circuses, like about these elephants here. Some people say they're afraid of mice, but that's crazy. When we pen the elephants up for the winter there's always mice that get in their hay, and it don't bother them none. The elephants never try to run away or stomp them or anything. They share the same cages all winter. And then some people say elephants got a good memory. Hell, some of the ones we got are so dumb they can't remember a simple trick from one year to the next."

Exercise 6: Writing Feature Leads

INSTRUCTIONS: First, write a straight news lead for each of the following stories. You leads should concisely summarize each story. Second, write a feature lead for each story. Or, your instructor may ask you to write a complete feature based upon one of these sets of facts.

1. An armored truck was traveling down Orange Avenue during this morning's rush hour. The truck hit a particularly bad pothole, and the backdoor of the vehicle flew open. The truck contained approximately \$20,000 in change the city had collected from its parking meters. The money fell to the pavement. Several bags burst open. Police halted traffic. City workers summoned to the scene used brooms to sweep up the coins, then shoveled them back into the truck. But, before the police and other city employees arrived at the scene, dozens of other motorists and bystanders stopped at the scene. Some offered to help. When city officials later counted the money retrieved by the workers, they found they had exactly \$18,482.17. The remainder seems to have been stolen.
2. Lt. James Robbins of your city's police department has made a study of everyone convicted of robbery in your city during the last year. He has written up a 19-page report. The police were looking for answers—anything that might help them detect or prevent crimes. Robbins surveyed a total of 250 people, including jail inmates. He also interviewed people from other police departments, the sheriff's department, the district attorney's office and the Probation and Parole Commission. He questioned people on how their agencies deal with burglaries and on their opinions of the characteristics of burglary suspects. The inmates he interviewed said they burglarized homes most often to get "quick and easy money," the report says. It adds that, "There was a significant amount of input which indicated that the money was to be used to support a drug or alcohol problem." Robbins also found that 95 percent of home burglars are men, most have less than a high school education, and most are between 14 and 23 in age, have no job and live in the neighborhood they burglarize. The average residential burglar was caught after robbing 28 houses. The report adds that: "almost half were caught because of dumb luck. They made a stupid mistake, like breaking into a house when the residents were there and had a gun. Or, they did something that made it easy to find them, like making a lot of noise, so the neighbors heard them, or using their real names while selling a piece of merchandise that was easy to identify. Others were caught for traffic violations, like speeding, and had everything they'd stolen piled up in plain sight in the back seat. No more than a third were caught because of good police work."
3. There is a trend in dogs. People no longer like full-sized dogs. Big dogs—those over 40 pounds, especially 5-year-old-and-up dogs—are about as much in demand these days as big cars. "About the only people who come in here and want to adopt a big dog are businesses or crime victims—after something has happened to them," says the Humane Society's director, Rika Brill. Even then, people tend to tire of the animal and return it to the shelter once their fear abates. Full-sized dogs, like Great Danes, Saint Bernards, Russian wolfhounds and German shepherds, are being unloaded for some of the same reasons: cost and space. The cost of owning a big dog averages about \$500 a year—just for the bare essentials. Also, more and more apartment complexes are banning or restricting pets. Most limit the size of pets to no more than 15 or 20 pounds, and charge a refundable damage deposit—in many cases, several hundred dollars. Some charge a \$250 non-refundable pet fee. Other apartment complexes charge a monthly fee of \$10 to \$20. So fewer people are willing to adopt a big dog. Also, people are turning big dogs in to the shelter at an alarming rate. Each year, the county's Humane Society takes in more than 20,000 homeless animals. Only 27 percent are adopted. Of the 27 percent fortunate enough to find new homes, fewer and fewer are large dogs. Which means they constitute the majority of the nearly 200 dogs and cats put to sleep each week at the Humane Society.
4. Charlotte Lopez owns The Gift Shoppe at 1010 Main Street in your city. Yesterday she took a fraudulent check to the city attorney. "I got a big surprise," Lopez said. "They told me if I couldn't positively identify the person who wrote it, they couldn't prosecute. There was no way that I could identify anyone—not with a couple hundred customers a day coming through my store. A third of them write checks." Other shop owners said they have the same problem. They have tried to get the city to prosecute people who write a worthless check but learned that it would take at least a year before the district attorney's overworked staff could get to it.

Most decided it was not worth the effort. So today, as a matter of policy, most will not take out-of-town or temporary checks. Others cash checks only for their regular customers. Most require identification, including a driver's license and a credit card—especially if the amount is more than \$50. Businesses given a worthless check can either take a loss or hire a collection agency to find the customer. State law makes it difficult to prosecute if improper or no information is available about the person who wrote the check. The district attorney explains that his office gets about 300 worthless check complaints a month. If prosecutors cannot identify the specific individual who wrote it, judges and law enforcement officers will refuse to sign a warrant or make an arrest for fear they will be held liable for false arrest. Even when investigators gather all the necessary information, only one in 200 cases is prosecuted. That's why so many stores no longer accept checks or require so much identification from people cashing checks, recording even their hair color and approximate age, height and weight. If a check is bad and they want to prosecute, they must be able to identify the specific individual who wrote it.

5. Two students in a psychology class at your school conducted an interesting experiment yesterday afternoon. One was a male and one was a female, both juniors. They drove to your city's largest shopping center. The male approached 100 strangers, and the female later interviewed all 100 of them. The male, Scott Lupa, explained: "It was for a class project. We wanted to see what would happen. I went up to 100 strangers, one at a time, and I asked them for directions to a testing clinic for AIDS. Then, no matter what the people said, I thanked them and tried to shake their hand. Most of the people really tried to help me; almost everyone gave me directions to a nearby hospital, but shaking hands concerned them. When I put my hand out, a lot automatically grabbed it. They didn't stop and think what they were doing until later. Then they realized they had touched me and began worrying about it—about getting AIDS." The second journalism student, Maryann Lathan, added: "These are some of the things people said when I interviewed them. I took down their exact words." An elderly woman said: "What was I supposed to do when he asked for directions? Scream and run?" A 50-year-old man said: "He looked normal to me. If someone needs help, I don't mind doing what I can." A 25-year-old man said: "I don't know for sure that you can get AIDS by shaking hands, but I don't like to take chances." Another man said: "As I shook his hand, it dawned on me that he said 'AIDS.' Then I did feel uncomfortable. But I think everyone is wary when it comes to AIDS." An elderly woman said: "I didn't mind shaking his hand. I'm more worried about catching colds than I am about catching AIDS." A 30-year-old woman said: "I'm always kissing my gay friends. I guess if I should be concerned about anything, it would be getting AIDS that way. I've lived in San Francisco, and I had a lot of gay friends there. I try not to judge people. I think anyone could get AIDS, not just gays."