

# Writing profiles

## Capturing personalities by painting word pictures

Everyone's got a story to tell. But some folks are more newsworthy than others, so we write profiles to explore their backgrounds, examine their characters, document their struggles and dreams.

Profiles are biographical, but they're more than a *who-what-when-where-why* rehash of facts. A good profile reveals feelings, exposes attitudes, captures habits and mannerisms. The finished story should be as entertaining as it is informative.

In-depth profiles can take days, even weeks, to assemble. You may need to check someone's credentials, dig up Web documents, read old news clips, consult with colleagues, family and friends.

But in the end, it all comes down to *interviewing*. Profiles provide the ultimate test of your interviewing skills. How well can you coax complete strangers into sharing the details of their private lives?

## HOW TO RESEARCH AND WRITE SUCCESSFUL PROFILES

◆ **Solicit your subject's support.** Make preliminary contact with the person you're profiling. Explain who you are, what you're doing, how long it may take. Explain how you'd like to conduct interviews, watch them at work, talk to their friends and colleagues. Be open, honest and nonthreatening.

◆ **Interview and observe.** You'll need *at least* one

intensive interview session, if not several. Gather quotes, anecdotes and detailed descriptions: how your subject looks, talks, dresses, acts and interacts with others. (For additional tips, see our section on interviewing ► page 76.)

◆ **Find your focus.** After your first interview, review your notes. Reflect. Ask yourself, "What have I got here? What am I missing?" And most importantly: "What's the most interesting angle for this story?" The best profiles are those that focus on an intriguing or newsworthy aspect of your subject's public or private life. Develop a theme that will help you plan your next step:

◆ **Follow up with further interviews and research.** Talk to your subject, and as many other sources as necessary, to flesh out your focus with facts, quotes and anecdotes. Take every opportunity to watch your subject at work or play in a setting that's relevant to your focus. This is where profiles demand the greatest investment of your (and your subject's) time. Yes, you *can* write single-source, single-interview stories; on a tight deadline, that may be your only option. But the fewer sources you interview and the less time you spend with your subject, the more your profile risks being inaccurate, shallow and dull. In fact, you shouldn't even call a single-interview story a *profile*.

◆ **Structure your story.** Review your material and decide how long your piece deserves to be. Is this a brief vignette? A day in the life? A full-length profile? Before you start writing, organize an outline like the sample story structure at left.

Decide how best to open and close the story. Craft an appealing lead, a solid nut graf, a fitting finish. In the main body, avoid fact-choked chronologies, rambling monologues, meaningless anecdotes. Be fair to your subject — but be kind to your readers.

### SAMPLE STORY STRUCTURE

#### I ANECDOTAL LEAD

An engaging, revealing little story to lure us in.

#### II NUT GRAF

Summarizes *why* this person matters *now*.

#### III SCENE 1

We observe our subject in action using dialogue, details and descriptions.

#### IV CHRONOLOGY

A recap of our subject's past activities using facts, quotes and anecdotes.

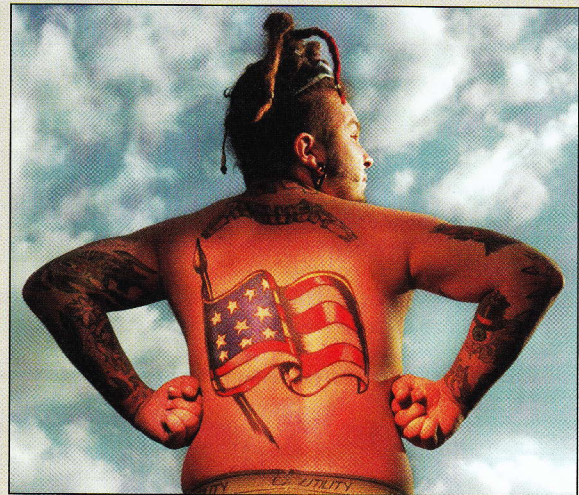
#### V SCENE 2

Another look at our subject in action, leading to:

#### VI WHAT LIES AHEAD

Plans. Dreams. Goals. Barriers to overcome.

#### VII CLOSING QUOTE



**J. Kyle Keener, *Detroit Free Press*:** "I often shoot symbolically, so a portrait becomes both a likeness of the subject and an icon for the idea I am trying to communicate. This image was part of a photo essay, 'Stars and Stripes Wherever,' about how a diverse group of Americans interpret the flag. Tattoo artist Nate Leintz, 28, represents the idea that patriotism is important to many Americans, not just World War II veterans. Shot from a low angle, with fists clenched, head held high and the classic sky background, Leintz looks strong and proud, almost Superman-like. Often, in both writing and photography, less is more. Showing all of Leintz's tattoos would have made the portrait too visually complex. With one spotlight illuminating the flag tattoo and a second light shining on his face, I can direct the viewer's eye right to the heart of the photograph."

## EVERY PROFILE DESERVES MEMORABLE PHOTOGRAPHY

Don't just take our word for it — listen to these words of advice from J. Kyle Keener, chief photographer at the *Detroit Free Press* and a widely respected photojournalist:

**On collaborating with photographers:** Talk to a photographer when you're thinking of possible stories to pursue because we're great resources for brainstorming. We tend to be out on the streets nearly all the time with our eyes wide open. Talented photographers see things that other people do not. When you spend your whole life looking, you learn to see better. At the very least, get a photographer involved as soon as you start your reporting so that you two don't miss any key moments to photograph and write about.

**On giving orders to photographers:** Avoid suggesting exactly what kind of photos we should take. Most photographers and photo editors consider this insulting and a sign of an inexperienced reporter who doesn't have a clue how to function as a team. How would you feel if I gave you a list of questions to ask the subject?

**On the time it takes to shoot successful photos:** Everyone thinks that we just come in, snap-snap-snap a few pictures, then leave. This is as far from the truth as you can get. Just like you need time to get to know and understand the subject of our profile, we need time to observe and get them comfortable with us hanging around taking photos. Great photographs for a profile don't just happen out of the blue, but evolve as the photographer gains the trust of the subject to get more intimate and storytelling photographs.

**On working a story collaboratively:** If the story is a long-term, in-depth profile, I want to be there to see and photograph what you see and write about. In this way, our words and pictures will complement each other. High-quality writing and pictures working together have a much stronger power to communicate.



For two full-length examples of profiles, visit **THE MORGUE** ► 252, 254

## QUOTED

*"There's a story in every man. The challenge is to find it. Then the problem is to tell it without putting the customers to sleep."*

**Jim Murray**,  
legendary sportswriter

*"I firmly believe that a good reporter can make a story — a story both newsworthy and honest — out of anyone. The trick, I think, is finding the soul that makes that person unique and yet allows others to identify with him or her."*

**Laurie Becklund**,  
former *Los Angeles Times* reporter

*"When I interviewed a former nun, one of the first things I wondered was, does she date and what does it feel like to be in the arms of a man and be kissed again, after 10 years in the convent? I finally got that question out about two hours into the interview, and by that time we were communicating so well that she answered it without hesitation. Don't be afraid to ask what you're wondering."*

**Mary Anne Pikrone**,  
reporter and editor

*"Nothing is more valuable to a writer than anecdotes. Why? Few people are able to stop reading an anecdote until it is over."*

**William L. Rivers**,  
author and journalism professor

*"The writer makes his living by anecdotes. He searches them out and craves them as the raw materials of his profession. No hunter stalking his prey is more alert to the presence of his quarry than a writer looking for small incidents that cast a strong light on human behavior. To the writer, the universe itself begins with a single case, a single emotion, a single encounter — in short, a single person."*

**Norman Cousins**,  
editor and writer

## 1 CAPTURE DETAILS

"If we wanted to spend our time reading resumes, we'd all be personnel managers," says Jack Hart, writing coach at *The Oregonian*. "And yet the conventional newspaper profile all too often consists of nothing more than a tedious recounting of biographical facts."

Want to bring characters to life? Observe them intently. Use all your senses to paint a revealing portrait:

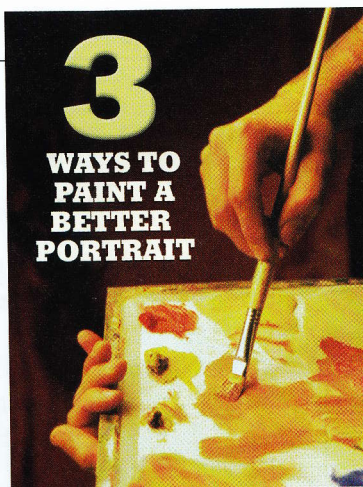
Sonny Glick, of St. Helens, stands 5 feet 6. What he lacks in height, he makes up in attitude. He uses volume rather than inflection to make his point.

Most days, the 240-pound man wears muscle shirts, hiking shoes and strong cologne. Court is the only place he forgoes wearing a baseball cap. A thick gold chain hangs from his neck, and a barbed-wire tattoo encircles his fleshy right biceps. He often gets "fired up" and has participated in 28 anger-management classes.

His childhood was as rough as his edges are now. . . .

— **Michelle Roberts**, *The Oregonian*

But be selective. Give us details that matter, that reveal facets of a person's personality. Don't bother describing how the professor sat in a chrome and black-leather chair gazing at a chestnut-backed chickadee in the 40-foot-tall oak outside his office window. Those are useless details that go nowhere. All they do is make your story longer.



## 2 RE-CREATE SCENES

These can be slice-of-life moments you actually observe, scenes that catch people in the act of being themselves. Or you can recapture meaningful anecdotes from someone's past:

Glick remembers going back to the jail dormitory, hoisting himself on the top bunk and pulling the cover over his head. He had hit rock bottom many times. Now he was free-falling into an abyss. He remembers crying for the first time since he was 19, when he'd looked into a coffin at the father he'd never known.

As Glick hid his tears beneath the scratchy jail blanket, something deep inside of him shifted.

"I was a loser, a jerk," he says. "I didn't know how I was going to do it, or if I even had a right to try. But I vowed I would never do drugs again. That I would raise my sons. That I'd be there for them."

## CHECKLIST

### HOW COMPLETE IS YOUR PROFILE?

Questions to ask when reporting and writing profile stories, from Susan Ager, columnist at the *Detroit Free Press*:

- Do readers understand why they should care about my subject?
- What do average readers want to know?
- What's the payoff for my subject? Why should he/she submit to this process?
- Can I provide insight and/or inside details about my subject?
- Can I watch my subject work/live/play?
- Is my story plump with vivid, memorable details about how my subject works and lives?
- Do I capture my subject in a real-life scene or two?
- Can I conduct two, three or more interviews, even if they're brief?
- Will I keep the interviews conversational?
- Will my questions be fresh, direct, specific?
- Will I ask about mundane as well as touchy, intimate matters?
- Are the quotes spicy and telling?
- Have I cut out all long, dull and predictable quotes?
- Have I talked to others who understand my subject or might see my subject with different eyes?
- Are the turning points in my subject's life obvious to the reader and explored for their lasting impact?
- Do I, by the end of my reporting, understand what motivates my subject, and will I make that clear to readers?

It's not necessary, in other words, to write every profile from the detached blandness of a newsroom. Immerse yourself in your subject's world and show us what goes on there. Fill your profiles with *verbs*, not just adjectives.

## 3 ADD QUOTES AND DIALOGUE

To write a successful profile, you need good quotes both *by* and *about* the person you're profiling.

But as every novelist knows, good dialogue is a terrific device for revealing character and capturing drama, too. You can record dialogue as you hear it or craft it from the anecdotes your sources tell you.

Here's an example from a profile of baseball player Tony Pena:

They drove around a beautiful community near Santiago. "Isn't this nice?" he asked his mother.

"Yes," she said. "It is beautiful."

They then drove through a neighborhood they had driven through before, many times. "I love these homes," Rosalia said.

"I know," Tony said. "I know."

And they pulled up to the nicest home.

"What do you think of this one?" he asked her.

"It is the home of my dreams," she said.

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a key, gave it to her.

"It is yours," he said. They both cried for a long time.

— **Joe Posnanski**, *The Kansas City Star*

## IDEA FILE

### FIND OUT WHAT'S IN THE WAL-MART SACK, AND DON'T LEAVE WITHOUT IT

"I once was profiling a murderer and had an interview with his ex-wife. I established rapport and asked great questions and she gave great answers.

"But I quickly realized what I needed from her wasn't the interview itself. In the chair next to her, she had a plastic Wal-Mart sack, the kind that you haul a couple big toys home in at Christmas time. In it were journals she had written in her grief over the murder of their daughter (he was acquitted), financial records, virtually every piece of paper this woman had dealing with her life with this man. This Wal-Mart sack was her file cabinet.

"I talked her into letting me take the sack back to my hotel. I spent three hours and about \$30 at Kinko's that night.

"In addition to providing valuable details such as exact dates, the Wal-Mart sack provided my lead. It came from a letter she had written to her dead daughter in one of the journals, saying she knew he would kill again. (He did, and I was writing the profile to run after his sentencing.)"

**Steve Buttry**,  
writing coach, American Press Institute