

# People in Stories: The Most Important Lesson

So You Want to Be a Journalist · By Simon Townsend · 6 min read

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## People

The secret of creating

your SALEABLE articles

## By SIMON TOWNSEND, Senior Tutor

THIS IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT FACTSHEET I EVER SEND YOU.

HUMAN BEINGS. People. Men, women, children . . .

You must get living, breathing PEOPLE into your articles if you want to sell to mainstream publications.

Pick up a daily or Sunday newspaper. Browse through the big-selling magazines like Who Weekly, Women's Weekly, Time, Woman's Day, New Idea, FHM and so on.

What do you see in the photos? What are the stories about? PEOPLE !! People does NOT include experts such as doctors, academics and people in charge of organisations. I have had some lazy students in the past who knock-off from the internet, quotes from experts and never collect their own fresh quotes. Such articles are always rejected by editors.

Readers (you and me) are forever curious about humans - human nature, human behaviour, human personality.

Why do humans do what they do? Why do they do what they do in the ways they do it? And what emotions do they feel about their decisions and actions? THAT'S what good mainstream journalism is all about.

People need to know about people. For just a topic, people can read brochures or encyclopaedias or the internet. In your student article, the topic may be cancer, stamp collecting, astronomy or bookbinding. But your story should be told through PEOPLE. A doctor and her patient dealing with cancer. An avid stamp collector who had her stolen lifelong collection returned. An astronaut and how she feels about having a star named after her. An old fashioned bookbinder finally going out of business. Whatever!

What are ALL people interested in? Answer: other people. We might love dogs or sport or computers. We might be passionate about food and travel, or art and music. But what we are most interested in is people.

People read books, magazines and newspapers to find out what PEOPLE are doing and what their opinions and feelings are. We want to read about even the people we dislike, just so we know what they're up to. We love to read about the people we admire, because we identify with their doings and their opinions. Few people are interested in royalty as an historical topic. But billions

are interested in the PEOPLE in the real-life soap opera that stars Queen Elizabeth II, the Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Charles, Camilla, Prince William, Prince Harry and the others.

We watch movies and television because we are endlessly fascinated about how PEOPLE react to life's obstacles, and we have opinions and feelings about not only these characters, but the actors who play them. We watch the news not to see catastrophes and political dramas, but to learn how PEOPLE reacted to them. And so on.

This is why I endlessly drill into you that you must enliven your articles and photos with PEOPLE.

You must have real quotes from real people, and direct quotes should contain opinions and feelings. To convey ordinary information, use indirect quotes, or let it be you the journalist conveying the information. Your readers, just like you, want to know, more than anything else, about PEOPLE. Remember the song about "people who need people"? Well, readers need people to make sense of stories.

- As a grizzled ol' journo wisely advised me: "Simon, no one gives a flying \* \* \* \* about the topic of flood control. But they will devour a story about ONE FARMER whose home and land has been ruined because a stupid council didn't get the riverbank raised on schedule." It's the humans readers care about - not the worthy topic.
- Does the ordinary person wish to read 3,000 words on the important topic of "the crisis in education". There's been a crisis in education since Adam was a boy. But tell the human story of what's happening in one school, or even one classroom, or even to ONE STUDENT, and you have a story about what people care about . . . other people
- No one wants a lecture on vulcanology and tectonic plate movement. But a story about a volcano erupting might be told through a MAN . . . what happened to him, what he feels about what happened to him, what he did, how he affected other people, what other people think of him.
- A story about airport security might be told through a WOMAN . . . what her job is all about, why she wanted to do it, how she went about getting her job, what she feels about her work and its difficulties and triumphs, what her colleagues think of her.
- A story about an old country church might be told through TWO PEOPLE . . . perhaps the friendship between the oldest parishioner, a 99-year-old man, and the 29-year-old female vicar, and what they both feel about the church building.
- A story about a disease might be told through a CHILD . . . how the disease affects him, how he copes, how he feels about the pain and long periods in hospital, and what others think of him.

An article that is just a set of facts and comments by experts about a topic is not really sought by mainstream media. Topics are in textbooks, on the internet and in pamphlets. People care about people, not topics. Topics are just the setting, but the PEOPLE to whom events HAPPENED are the heart and soul of good articles.

Too often some of my students pick a topic, find some internet site to obtain information from, and leave it at that. These students need to go a step further and select a PERSON to inject into their story and HUMANISE it.

Also, I think you should give your readers a pen picture of the people you write about. Here's my standard advice on this important part of good writing.

Describe him or her.

Give readers things to imagine in their mind's eye.

IN GIVING A "SNAPSHOT" of a person, you might give their:

- NAME (usually indicating sex and sometimes ethnicity)
- OCCUPATION or WORKPLACE or EMPLOYER
- HOME SUBURB OR TOWN
- Whether SINGLE, MARRIED, DIVORCED or SEPARATED
- Whether PARENT of one child or 17 children
- And AGE

It all adds up to helping the reader form a mental picture of this person. If you don't know whether your target publication wants to include this info, include it anyway. Is your real question about your own embarrassment to ask someone their age? Don't be shy. If you ask politely, people don't mind. In fact, many people are flattered that you care, and many people are proud of their age.

- Her age (specific age, not "young", "middle-aged" or "old")
- Height (not "tall" or "short" but the measurement, perhaps both metric and imperial)
- Body shape (build)
- Clothes
- Accent
- Glasses? Jewellery?
- Facial expressions
- Eyes, eyebrows
- Hands (long fingers, paint-covered, dirt-covered, whatever)
- Body language
- Hair colour, hair style, skin tone
- Facial hair (beard, moustache, side-levellers)?
- General demeanour (smiling, sad, laughing, polite, shy, angry)

Not all of these aspects, but something other than JUST the words they spoke. You might also describe where the person was at the time of interview (at big desk, in warm kitchen, at workbench, etc). For a scene, describe it so we readers might feel as if we too are there. Tell us the size of objects such as a 1 metre tall dog - not a "big dog" or worse "a very big dog". Think of your five senses (touch, taste, smell, hearing and sight). Was the thing rough, smooth, brittle? Was there an odour of pine trees? Could you hear engines chugging in the background? Was the telephone red? Add another "sense" if appropriate: time. How long did it take the woman to walk to the fountain or the blacksmith to shoe the horse? It's more enjoyable to read writing that gives us concrete pen pictures rather than vague images. Sort of a picture is worth a thousand words, if you know what I mean.

# **This Is The Single Most Important**

**FACTSHEET I EVER SEND YOU.**

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