

The Health/Science Feature

How to report, plan and create

Developing Your Angle, Part 1

- Do a Google search to see who has already covered your topic.
- If it has gotten no attention, or attention only in niche media, the story is still '**juvenile**,' i.e. the material will be new to a general audience. (Or if it's been covered in print and you plan to do it as a radio or video story, you still can consider the material fresh.)
 - In this case, your angle can be as simple as:
 - This trend is happening
 - This controversy exists
 - This new program is attempting to solve a public health issue, etc.
- If, on the other hand, the story has been covered in big national outlets like the NYT, WSJ, NPR, that means it is already '**mature**,' i.e. people know about it. So you need to find a new, more nuanced angle.

EXAMPLE:

- Kyle Ligman, H&S '14, discovered an obscure study about the value of eating insects. The idea was fresh when he found the study in February 2014. (It was a juvenile story.)
- But by the time he was ready to pitch a feature months later, coverage of the insect-eating trend had exploded. (The story was now mature.)
- So Kyle dug deeper and found a new angle: the FDA and local health officials were flummoxed by the task of judging the safety of insects being served at restaurants and in packaged foods.
- **His story ran in *Newsweek* on March 28, 2015: “Weak Oversight Is Holding Back Edible Insects”**

Developing Your Angle, Part 2

- **Pre-reporting:** A solid angle won't necessarily pop into your head. You need to talk with experts and people involved in the story to figure out which strand stands out as fresh and engaging.
- **The exploratory interview:** Identify a person who is steeped in the topic and ask if they will chat with you for half an hour. Ask them what's new, what's changing, what's troubling, etc.

Developing Your Angle, Part 3

- During your research, you'll know you've found a solid angle because it is something that is:
 - **Little-known**
 - **Surprising**
 - **Counterintuitive**
 - **Controversial**

In Addition to an Angle, Your Story Needs...

- The '**Why now?**' (news hook). Editors want to know why they should publish your story now
 - The news hook can come in the form of a:
 - Quantifiable trend (with data to back it up)
 - New study
 - New program
 - Emerging consensus among experts
 - Etc.
- Your story also needs these elements:
 - It **affects 'real' people**
 - **Experts** study the issue and can serve as sources

Now that you have your angle, the next thing to do is to incorporate it into a nutgraf.

***Write the nutgraf first**—as soon as you know what your angle is, and **long before you've finished your reporting**. The nutgraf becomes your guide to what does and does not belong in the story, and will help keep your reporting on track.

[NOTE: If you are working in audio or video, you won't use the nutgraf in your final product. However, you need to create it anyway. It will serve not only as a reporting guide but also as the pitch you will share with colleagues to communicate the concept of your story. *It may also serve as the basis for your host intro.*]

Overview of feature structure

[**NOTE:** The following plan pertains to a text story. **If you are working in audio or video**, your story structure will be different. In this case you will need to come up with the main points that your story needs to make [*see info on story body*], and aim to have sources on tape make each point. For a 3-4 minute story, you should have two to four sources.

Classic Feature Structure

Lead (usually anecdotal)

Nutgraf

Punctuating Quote

History/Context

Rest of body [3-5 topic areas. *See William Blundell's six-part planning document. More on this later ...*]

Coming full circle or looking to future
(quote or microcosm anecdote)

INTRO

BODY

END

Feature Structure

Intro section: The Lead

The feature lead is usually:

- *a scene, or

- *a synopsis of a situation faced by a person who has been affected by the issue that your story is about.

Much time may go into finding just the right person for your lead. The person's situation should encapsulate the most extreme version of the issue that your story is about

For example, a cute and relevant story this scientist told me became the lead ...

The Future Of Medicine

Two breakthroughs in biology are transforming the way we understand and treat disease

BY EMILY LABER-WARREN

The Human Microbiome

Some years ago, David Relman, a Stanford University physician and infectious disease expert, made an unusual request at his dentist's office. "Before they started cleaning, I said, 'Look, that stuff that you're going to scrape off my teeth—instead of wiping it on the gauze and throwing it away, would you mind putting it inside these little tubes?' And they said, "Sure, whatever."

Relman's cleaning appointment was routine, but what it yielded was anything but. Back at his lab, he placed half the tooth scum on nutrient-rich agar plates—

the traditional way to figure out what creatures were living in it. The other half he analyzed with a cutting-edge DNA technique. The bugs that proliferated on the plates were mostly familiar. But the DNA method turned up 31 never-before-seen bacterial species. If this sounds underwhelming, bear in mind that these creatures were discovered not in some remote deep-ocean vent but inside the human mouth, a place that has been relentlessly probed by biologists since the 1670s.

Feature Structure

Intro section: The Nutgraf

The feature nutgraf may be multiple paragraphs.

The nutgraf broadens from the zoomed-in specificity of the lead to establish the larger issue at stake.

The nutgraf includes:

- * your angle
- * your news hook
- * overview of evidence (data, legislation, studies, events in the news—as many types as possible) to establish the breadth, relevance, significance and impact of the issue your story is about

For example, here is my nutgraf ...

Relman reported his oddball dental adventure in a 1999 paper. Today, the quest to identify the many denizens of the human body has become one of the most compelling areas of medical research. Scientists have learned that each one of us hosts up to 100 trillion microorganisms, which means that as many as 9 of every 10 cells in your body don't belong to you. These creatures live in and on you, teeming in your eyes and nasal passages, your skin, intestines, armpits, gut, mouth, genitals and bellybutton. Scientists call this vast collection of life-forms the human microbiome.

That we are colonized by bacteria, fungi and viruses isn't news. But in the past decade or so, what has become clear is the diversity of the microbiome and how powerfully it shapes our lives. Our microbial inhabitants are not just freeloaders. We rely on them to help us digest food, fight off infection, keep our metabolisms running properly and perhaps even regulate our moods.

Angle: *Modern technology is revealing that the human microbiome is vaster than previously thought, and essential to many aspects of health.*

News hook: *Scientists are increasingly studying the human microbiome as they realize how important it is*

Feature Structure

Intro section: The Punctuating Quote

The “punctuating quote” or “establishing quote” comes after the dense material of the nutgraf, giving readers a catchy summation of your angle in a human voice.

For example ...

” “I think it’s been an important shift in perspective, from thinking of ourselves as an organism that has bacteria on us to thinking about ourselves as an ecosystem,” says Rob Knight, a pioneering microbial ecologist at the University of Colorado.

Feature Structure

Body section: History/context

Once your intro section is complete, you've hooked your audience and established that there is momentum and a larger issue at stake.

The first part of your body section is a moment to step back and provide either:

- * history
- * context

For example, if the topic is technical, this would be a place to explain the basic science. It could also be a place to situate the issue in historical context.

For example, here is my context section ...

Scientists used to be able to study tiny life-forms only by coaxing them to grow in their labs—and most of the 10,000 or so microbiome species can't survive outside the human body. But now we can identify these creatures simply by grinding them up and analyzing their DNA. It's not that there wasn't interest in the microbiome before, Relman says. "It's just that people were limited by the tools available."

Feature Structure

Main body section: 3-5 points

The body of your story will touch on a handful of subtopics—the key points you want to make—and organized logically so that they each speak to a different aspect of the story you are telling.

To figure out what these subtopics are, consider the six feature planning areas of William Blundell:

***History, Scope, Reasons,
Impacts, Countermoves, Futures**

Feature Structure

Main body section: 3-5 points

Which **one or two of these six areas** form(s) the **main focus of your feature?** **[ONLY ONE OR TWO!]**

1. **History:** Does the central issue of my story have roots in the past?
2. **Scope:** How geographically widespread is this issue? How much money is involved? How many, and which *kinds* of people and institutions are involved?
3. **Reasons:** Which economic, social, political, legal and psychological reasons underlie this issue?
4. **Impacts:** How does the issue help or hurt various communities?
5. **Countermoves:** Who is working to combat or deflect the issue and how?
6. **Futures:** What could happen if the issue continues unchecked? Any formal studies or projections? Informal opinions from observers and participants?

For example ...

This story body touches on **Impacts**** (modern life is harming the microbiome, with negative impact on public health) and ****Futures**** (new understanding of the microbiome could lead to fixes)**

This new ability to probe the microbiome comes not a moment too soon. Scientists are concerned that antibiotics, the wonder drugs that helped increase the average life span after World War II, are overused. These powerful medicines—fed to cattle and handed out almost reflexively by many doctors—kill good bugs along with the bad, while making bad bugs increasingly pernicious. Our tiny partners can bounce back, but sustained assaults may be annihilating key species, disrupting the microbial balance within our bodies and leading to widespread inflammation and immune disorders.

“We have coevolved with these microbes since time immemorial,” says microbiologist Martin Blaser of New York University, author of the 2014 book *Missing Microbes* (Henry Holt). “This has been a very long-term partnership.” The war we are waging against our own bacteria, he warns, may help foster modern plagues such as diabetes, obesity, asthma and even autism.

The good news: scientists hope to harness beneficial microbiotas, turning them into a new kind of medicine. Biologists are even prospecting for useful microbes amid the feces of indigenous peoples, whose microbiomes are markedly different from ours. Feel left out? Mail your poop to the American Gut Project (humanfoodproject.com/american-gut) to aid the research.

Feature Structure: The End

There are two good ways to end a feature:

1. Coming full circle (for example, returning to the person in the anecdotal lead and resolving their story)

2. Looking to the future

Often the ending takes the form of:

- * a quote that either sums up or looks to the future
- * a scene that represents, in microcosm, the theme of your story

For example, this story ends by looking to the future ...

One day, cocktails of carefully selected organisms could be prescribed to lower cholesterol, treat inflammatory bowel disease or combat obesity. Such treatments would differ from the probiotics currently sold in health food stores, which consist of just a few generic species and haven't been widely tested for efficacy. "In all new fields of exploration, there's always a lot of hype," says Blaser. "The question is, when can the scientific community deliver on the microbiome promise."

REVIEW:

Intro section: Lead, nutgraf, punctuating quote ...

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"I think it's been an important shift in perspective, from thinking of ourselves as an organism that has bacteria on us to thinking about ourselves as an ecosystem," says Rob Knight, a pioneering microbial ecologist at the University of Colorado.

LEAD →

NUTGRAF →

PUNCTUATING QUOTE →

← LEAD

← NUTGRAF

STEVE SCHWEISSER/SCIENCE SOURCE

THEN... body section and end.

CONTEXT →

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