

Writing a profile

The personality profile is an article about an individual, and profiles are one of the staples of feature writing. No doubt you've read profiles in newspapers, magazines or websites. Profiles can be done on just about anyone who's interesting and newsworthy, whether it's the local mayor or a rock star.

Here are seven tips for producing great profiles.

1. Take the Time to Know Your Subject

Too many reporters think they can produce quick-hit profiles where they spend a few hours with a subject and then bang out a story. That won't work. To really see what a person is like you need to be with him or her long enough so that they let their guard down and reveal their true selves. That won't happen in an hour or two.

2. Watch Your Subject in Action

Want to know what a person is really like? Watch them doing what they do. If you're profiling a professor, watch him teach. A singer? Watch (and listen) to her sing. And so on. People often reveal more about themselves through their action than their words, and watching your subject at work or play will give you lots of action-oriented description that will breathe life into your story.

3. Show the Good, the Bad and the Ugly

A profile shouldn't be a puff piece. It should be a window into who the person really is. So if your subject is warm and cuddly, fine, show that. But if they're cold, arrogant and generally unpleasant, show that too. Profiles are most interesting when they reveal their subjects as real people, warts and all.

4. Talk to People Who Know Your Subject

Too many beginning reporters think a profile is just about interviewing the profilee. Wrong. Human beings usually lack the ability to objectively view themselves, so make a point of talking to people who know the person you're profiling. Talk to the person's friends and supporters, as well as their detractors and critics. As we said in tip no. 3, your goal is to produce a rounded, realistic portrait of your subject, not a press release.

5. Avoid Factual Overload

Too many beginning reporters write profiles that are little more than an accretion of facts about the people they are profiling. But readers don't particularly care when someone was born, or what year they graduated from college. So yes, include some basic biographical information about your subject, but don't overdo it.

6. Avoid Chronologies

Another rookie mistake is to write a profile as a chronological narrative, starting with the person's birth and plodding through their life up to the present. That's boring. Take the good stuff - whatever it is that makes your profile subject interesting - and emphasize that right from the start.

7. Make a Point About Your Subject

Once you've done all your reporting and gotten to know your subject reasonably well, don't be afraid to tell your readers what you've learned. In other words, make a point about what kind of person your subject is. Is your subject shy or aggressive, strong-willed or ineffectual, mild or hot-tempered? If you write a profile that doesn't say something definitive about its subject, then you haven't done the job.