Book Review: *Feature & Magazine Writing* Teaches Feature Writing for Multi-Media Audiences

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Anyone who has taught college-level courses in feature writing knows that the textbook landscape is pretty bleak. We have some old standbys, such as William Zinsser’s classic *On Writing Well*, now in its 30th edition (Harper Perennial, 2006), William Blundell’s wise and technical *The Art and Craft of Feature Writing* (Plume, 1988), Jon Franklin’s formulaic but compelling *Writing for Story* (Plume, 1994), and Roy Peter Clark’s practical and all-encompassing *Writing Tools* (Little, Brown, and Company, 2008).

Each one is an excellent choice to assign during the portion of a feature writing class devoted to craft, storytelling, and the workshopping of student articles. But before a professor can turn students loose and ask them to put into practice this new language of interviews, leads, nutgrafs, kickers, hooks, queries, and angles, the students first need to know the basics of the media landscape.

Here is where Sumner and Holly G. Miller’s *Feature & Magazine Writing: Action, Angle and Anecdotes* comes in. It’s among the best of a small field of feature writing textbooks, particularly due to its focus on the industry and the need for students to develop professional knowledge and skills—not just prose wizardry.

The third edition includes professor access to a website with more than 100 pages of handouts and exercises, as well as sample quizzes for each of the book’s 22 chapters.

In this latest edition, as in the past, Sumner and Miller walk students through the necessary steps in developing strong story ideas with fresh angles. They reinforce the importance of audience awareness and the rhetorical situation (i.e. focusing a story differently for *Cosmopolitan* than, say, *Marie Claire*). They offer practical tips, examples, and “sidebars” related reporting, querying, story structuring, digital storytelling, self-editing, interning, and job-searching. Basically it’s a one-stop shop of a textbook!

But its comprehensiveness shouldn’t surprise anyone. As readers of this publication likely know, David E. Sumner is an expert in the world of journalism education. Sometimes

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known as “Professor Magazine,” he has coordinated Ball State University’s magazine journalism major for 23 years and in 2007 was named “Educator of the Year” by the AEJMC Magazine Division. However, the text offers more than just an experienced teacher’s understanding of what students need to know. Sumner’s co-author Holly G. Miller is a working journalist and former senior editor at The Saturday Evening Post; together they have found a winning formula.

Previous editions of FMW have been adopted by 50-plus American colleges and universities, as well as abroad.

At the end of each chapter they suggest some helpful in-class activities and assignments. Previous editions had those elements stuck in the back of the book, and they’re a welcome addition to the main text.

They turn students’ attention to the professional media marketplace and how it works—one of the hardest things for beginning feature writers to understand and respond to. As lifelong consumers of media, they generally know (or at least assume) that media markets exist; however, it is challenging for them to analyze markets and subsequently develop well-angled story ideas. The chapter “To Market, To Market” provides excellent background in this area. Students should read this chapter before they do assignments asking them to analyze a magazine, its writers’ guidelines, and its media kit before developing a query and angling a story idea.

Part three focuses on articles having action and anecdotes—a concept that’s been central to Sumner and Miller since their text’s first edition.

Next up is one of the book’s most helpful sections, “Part IV: Different Formats, Different Results,” which surveys, explains, and provides some examples of the basic feature writing forms: briefs, profiles, service articles, seasonal pieces, trend stories, and nonfiction narratives (called “dramatic stories” in prior editions). In particular, the nonfiction narrative survey is helpful; it covers in-depth interviewing techniques and suggests some basic plot archetypes. The section about “Eliminating the Ho-Hum from the How-To” also gives students ideas to jazz up their next list article.

The book has a new addition with “Part V: Exploring Digital Opportunities,” which takes on blogging and long-form digital storytelling. Authored by Brad King, an assistant professor with Sumner at Ball State, this section analyzes different approaches to blogging and addresses how bloggers can interact in their self-created digital communities. It covers how long-form stories are being told within a tablet environment and suggests how to keep digital stories reader-friendly. It’s a wonderful primer for students and teachers unfamiliar with the field.

As Sumner and Miller write in their introduction, “distinctions in ‘feature writing’ for newspapers, magazine and online media have blurred,” suggesting that a story’s platform doesn’t matter as much as its execution and audience appropriateness. As such, Feature & Magazine Writing offers novice students the core information they need. It doesn’t matter if
the student’s chosen medium is daily newsprint, a monthly glossy, or an iPad, Sumner’s and Miller’s approach reinforces the time-tested tenets of feature journalism: Make things interesting, well-organized, market-appropriate, and reader-friendly.