

Communication 4312 – A Certain Kind of Story

One of the stories that you'll eventually write is the story that sums up what a bunch of people are doing. This can occur in one of several ways: a story on what people think about a certain question; the report of an informal poll; the summary of what has been happening in a certain area (the housing market); people meeting for some reason or other; etc.

Taking our class as an example, we have a bunch of people with different backgrounds and interests and we need to do a story that brings all that together. The question is: how do we do that?

First, what not to do: Stay away if at all possible from a kind of summary lead. Example: Twenty-two people are taking the feature writing class from David McHam this semester. Or: Dozens of people interviewed say the cost of tuition at U of H is causing a hardship on them.

Why not do it that way? It's too dry. It lacks a human element. It may give too much authority to an informal study or whatever.

So, then, how to do it? Take one incident or one person and lead with that. If the story is about, say, our class, take one person and put that person in the lead. Ideally, you would choose a person whose experience exemplifies the class. Failing that, find a person of special interest and lead with her or him.

Then what? First, use all the information you can about the person you have chosen. Perhaps two or three paragraphs. If you can come up with a suitable quote, use it. The quote must be directly related to the class and should be typical of what other students would say.

Now comes the tricky part: You must bring in the rest of the class. That can be tough. Remember, if it was easy anyone could do it. The challenge is to bring in others without making it sound stilted. (Stilted example: She's only one of 22 people taking feature writing)

You've got to anchor the story. It's what I call setting the story in time and place. You will need a paragraph that answers all the important questions about the class. Don't include anything that is not essential. But, certain aspects of the class have to be included.

Now we get to the body of the story. Proceed here in one of two ways.

Way 1: You can give a paragraph or two on other class members. Say two or three. Not many more than that, though. Again, the people you choose must fit into the framework of the story you are writing. Don't go off on tangents here.

Let's say the underlying theme of the story is people who come back to school. If you lead with one person then in the body you could use another couple of people who have also come back to school.

Way 2: At some point you will need to actually sum up the class. You can either do that after you have summed up the class. Or if you have taken Way 1 you will need to do that immediately after you have talked about other people in the class. The point is, don't put it off too long.

Here's where you say that the students include 12 who are seniors, six of whom hope to graduate this semester. You can include where they are from, how they got here, etc., etc., etc. That requires some reporting.

Again, you want to do this without making the story sound like you are filling out a form. You may want to rewrite and edit the story to make it sound natural. But with experience, you will be able to pull it off.

Do you use more quotes other than whatever you may have used at the beginning of the story? Probably not. This is not the kind of story in which you let people talk. It's more explanatory with you, the writer, doing the explaining.

I'm not saying that you always have to write this kind of story this way. I'm just telling you how to get started. Again, with experience you will be able to break the mold and write the story more creatively. What we are talking about here is a starting point.

This may be a good time to introduce this concept to you. As the writer, your obligation is to take the material and shape it to give it meaning. Lots of decisions are involved in that process. Writing is a thinking process. Typing is the act of converting the thinking to a tangible form.

■ David McHam