MAJOR PROJECT: REPRESENTATIVE PROFILE

JRN 200 Journalism Research/Prof. Christian.

This project and accompanying assignments are taken from material generously supplied by Prof. Dave Boeyink at Indiana University.

Assignment
One major assignment in this course is a representative profile, the story of a person through whom the lives of similar people can be seen. This will be the largest individual project you will undertake, but don't be overwhelmed. We'll work at it in steps. And I'll help you along the way. Deadlines may shift as we move along, so stay alert!

Step 1: Find a person.

Identify a local person unlike yourself who will be willing to spend an hour or two with you every week. Here are a few examples:

1. A transexual.
2. A family suffering because of a PCB dump near their farm.
3. A family living in public housing.
4. An elderly woman who was a world traveler, but is now confined to a nursing home.
5. A local rock musician.
6. A student with mental problems.
7. A gambler.
8. A homeless man.
9. An undertaker
10. A janitor
11. Anyone living on minimum wage
12. A secretary
13. A stroke victim
14. Someone who is unemployed
15. An ambulance driver
16. A factory worker, perhaps working night shift
17. A housewife
18. A special-education classroom teacher
19. A person who is dying
20. A working single parent
21. An immigrant family adapting to a new culture

Submit the name and basic information about the person you have found (include occupational status, address, telephone). Include some ideas about how you see this story developing, including any potential themes. I'll offer suggestions or let you know if we have problems. This will not be graded, but failure to hand in this assignment without an extension will cost you two points in the score of your profile story.
Whom to pick
You can adopt one of two strategies. One option is to choose someone you already know -- someone who has an interesting job or interesting experiences. But keep in mind that this person must not be a friend, family member, or anyone with whom you have some significant acquaintance. If you have a question, be sure to ask me. The quality of your final story will depend on the person you find. At the same time, this need not be a person who leads an exciting life or who gives you great quotes. You can make this person's life real through your observations and description of ordinary feelings, events or problems.

Option 2: Most of you may need to pick an area that interests you, even if you don't know someone who fits that area. You may wish to pursue a couple of options in case one falls through. Before you contact anyone, check with me about your ideas for the story. If you know what area(s) you are interested in, figure out the best way to locate a person who represents it well.

In either case, you want someone who represents a larger group of people in similar jobs or situations. That will allow you to give your final story its larger context. For example, the welfare mother may illustrate the problems of many single parents living in poverty. You can get lots of statistical information on that issue. Or you may be able to focus on the problem of job security in a story about a factory worker. That larger dimension may emerge out of your contact with the person over time.

Assume this story will be submitted to a newspaper for publication. Some of these final stories will be good enough to make it into print. That means you should identify yourself as a journalism student to all sources, telling them you are working on a story which may be published.

Step 2: Develop a profile of this person.

Spend time with this person several times each week. Capture the flavor of this person's life in your observations of the physical surroundings. Describe the workplace and/or home in detail in your notes. Also make notes of the person's physical and behavioral traits. Keep an accurate record of your conversations, marking material with potential for your final story.

You will submit a two-page report on your subject. Begin by identifying 1-3 possible themes for the whole series of stories. Then describe what you have found out about this person that illustrates those themes. This will not be graded, but failure to hand in this assignment without an extension will cost you two points in the score of your profile story.

Step 3: Profile story: first draft
Take the information you have been gathering through conversation and observation with your subject and write a descriptive personality profile. This profile should focus on the key theme(s) you are pursuing in this series. This story will count 40 percent of the profile story grade.

Step 4: Document story

Pick one or more of these themes and research it using as many documented sources as you can find. A minimum of five independent sources is required; more is better. Now write a story (50-70 lines) based on this research. Do not use the personal information about your subject in this story -- just the facts. Include a bibliography of your sources. The bibliography should follow this format: Author or source of information, title of book or publication, date published, publisher, pages cited, web address and date downloaded (if applicable).

Step 5: Profile story: final draft

Using my comments and the comments of classmates, revise your story. Do more observation of your subject if needed. This story will count 60 percent of the profile story grade.

Step 6: Interview story

Identify a minimum of three human sources (more is better) who can address the theme(s) you have identified as the focus of your final project. Interview them and write a two-page story (50-70 lines) based on their information. Include bibliography of sources. The bibliography should include the source’s full name, place of employment, job title, address, phone number.

Step 7: Final story: first draft

Combine your research, interviews and observations into your final story. Because you already have all the information you need, the key to this step will be thinking carefully (and early) about what you want to say and how to organize it. An outline will be indispensable. This story should be written as a news feature story.

Be prepared to submit all your notes (interviews, data) in a single folder, but only if I ask for them.

You will have the opportunity to rewrite your profile story, your interview story and your final story. The document story will not be rewritten.

An Example
We will spend more time in class working on each of these steps. But here is an example of how you would gather the information needed in the first four steps.
Step 1: Find an elderly person dealing with loss of spouse. Here are some places to check:

- Nursing homes
- Churches
- Senior citizens' organizations
- Retired senior volunteers
- Support groups
- Social service agencies

Work out a schedule of times to visit. Make sure you see the person at key places and times. Vary the location if possible and appropriate. If the elderly person lives at home, get there to see how the presence of the spouse is still evident.

Steps 2, 3 and 5: Profile and themes

Look for characteristics, quotes, observations that will convey the personality and situation of the person and the group she represents. Organize notes around these ideas. Be sure to capture the physical setting. If you were describing this person to a friend who had never met the subject, what would you want to say? Identify themes: loneliness, loss of income/security, adapting to new tasks (cooking, cleaning).

Step 4: Data search: loneliness

Find out what percentage of people over 65 live alone. What percentage of those who live alone also live independently? What are the psychological problems of those who live alone? What are the economic problems? How many of the elderly live in poverty? How are these problems changing as life expectancy increases? Here are a few sources to help:

- An almanac
- American Statistics Index
- Government documents (IU library)
- Articles on social security
- U.S. Census Bureau
- Articles on pensions
- Association for the Advancement of Retired Persons
- "Social issues" in Kessler and McDonald's Uncovering, p. 74
- Journal articles on gerontology
- Articles on mental health and elderly

Step 6: Interview: loneliness

Based on the research that has been done in step 3, find experts who can provide information on the theme of loneliness among the elderly.
IU faculty: psychology, sociology
Local psychologists
Local gerontologists (hospital)
Local physicians (loneliness and health)
Nursing home administrators
Psychologist on retainer to nursing home
Senior citizen organizations (yellow pages)
Social service organizations (yellow pages)

Step 7: Final story
Combine the material from all three stories into a single story or series. This material should be written as a long newspaper feature. Use triangulation to combine similar material from the three stories in a single paragraph or section. Return to your profile or to documents to supplement ideas that have arisen since the project began. Organization is the magic word.