

Personality Feature

The personality feature tends to be the feature most dreaded by DINFOS students. But the personality feature doesn't have to be hard to write; it's just another step in the process of becoming a journalist. And it doesn't involve the use of any more skill than you've already learned in the course; it just requires that you focus on an individual instead of a place or thing.

The personality feature is a more specialized type of human interest feature. People are curious about other people; it's human nature. So a personality feature, if you remember to get and use the information people expect to find in a personality feature, should be one of the most enjoyable features you write. After all, you can use your job to satisfy not only your readers' curiosity about your subject, but your own!

A good writer can capture a character much better in print than a great artist can capture him on canvas. The writer can depict the subject from every conceivable angle, in every type of action, and catch the subtle characteristics that make the subject a unique human being.

A personality feature, also known as a profile, is an in-depth look at a person's lifestyle, characteristics, emotions, hobbies, appearance or just what makes the person tick. Vividly described in colorful prose, it usually allows the reader to place himself in the eyes of the reporter or writer. The reader should come away from the story feeling as if he or she knows and could recognize the person profiled.

To accomplish this, the reporter must be alert to numerous characteristics. If a checklist were to be compiled, it might take the form below.

However, keep in mind that a person cannot be defined by a standardized checklist. Such a list can't possibly cover all or even most of the subtle characteristics that make the subject a unique person. Yet, at the same time, many of the items included would not be applicable to many subjects. Each

personal profile must be written in a special style to effectively portray that person. By following a checklist, a journalist could spend unnecessary hours, even days, gathering unusable details that would not contribute toward the purpose of the story.

Rather, look at this checklist as an illustration of the need for details -- the need to be organized and observant in your research. Small, often painfully subtle details may spell the difference between a superficial story and an effective portrait.

Afterward, take a look at the sample personality profile. See how much of the information the checklist calls for is actually in the story; how much is information gained above what the list calls for; how much information the checklist calls for that isn't necessary for this particular story.

I. Physical characteristics:

1. Facial features

a. What features best give insight to the appearance? What features are distinguishing?

-- Does he have a fine, delicate face, or a craggy face with a long chin and beaked nose?

-- What is the color of his eyes? Their demeanor (sleepy, beady, probing, etc.)?

-- What characterizes his mouth? Is it wide, thin, gaping?

-- Are his cheeks high, puffed, hollow, bony?

2. Skin complexion

Is the texture chalky, tanned, chocolate, wan?

3. Hair color and style

a. Is it thick and oily, thinning or receding?

b. What color is it? Is it shiny black? Carrot red?

- c. How does he wear it? Crew cut, parted, slicked down?
- d. Does he have facial hair? What kind?
- 4. Physical stature
 - a. How tall is he?
 - b. How much does he weigh? How is that weight distributed?
-- Is he fit and muscular? Or is he "padded?"
- 5. Clothing (even if the person normally wears a uniform to work)
 - a. What colors does he prefer? Does he tend to dress in dark basics, bright solids, or pastels?
 - b. Does he prefer a particular style?
 - c. Does he normally wear a hat? Is it a 10-gallon cowboy hat, or a bowler?
 - d. Does he wear a necktie? What kind -- wide, narrow, bolo, dark or plain? A bow tie?
 - e. What kind of shirt? Traditional, or brightly colored? Cufflinks?
 - f. Jewelry? Is that jewelry symbolic, like a cross? Gaudy, like a diamond necklace?
 - g. Eyeglasses or contact lenses? What kind/style?
 - h. State of clothing: rumpled or well-pressed?
 - i. Socks or stockings? What kind/color?
 - j. What kind of shoes? Are they well-kept (polished or scuffed)?
 - k. How about the fit of the clothes? Are they ill-fitting, perhaps indicating a weight loss/gain or careless shopping, or do they appear tailored?
- 6. Habits and mannerisms
 - a. Does he smoke? How much? Cigarettes? Cigars? Pipe tobacco? Milds or regulars? Filtered or unfiltered? Kings or 100s? How does he hold the item? How does he inhale and hold the smoke?
 - b. Does he have nervous ticks? Does he nod and jerk his head or tap his pen on the desk? Does he chew his lip or bite his fingernails?
 - c. What does he do with his hands? Are they clasped, scribbling, "talking?"
 - d. Does he squirm, or sit calmly?

7. Posture and bearing

- a. Does he slouch or sit/stand upright? Are his shoulders squared or slumped?
- b. Does he walk with his head down, or his back straight and his head held high?

8. Voice and speech pattern

- a. How does the voice sound -- high and squeaky? Low and guttural? Husky? Gritty?
- b. Is the manner of speaking gruff or whining?
- c. Does the volume tend to be loud or soft?
- d. Is there a noticeable accent?
- e. How precise is his grammar? Does he speak in flawless grammar, normal conversational English, or does he misuse words, use slang and very poor grammar?
- f. What is his speaking pace -- fast, rhythmic, slow?
- g. What is his style -- flowery, blunt, rambling?

9. Overall physical impression

- a. Does he resemble someone famous?
- b. Does he appear to fit a classic occupational stereotype? Does the police chief look the image of an Irish policeman?

II. What is his personality?

1. Expression

- a. How does he express himself verbally? Is he gruff or salty? Does he beat around the bush or come right to the point?
- b. How energetic is he? Is he nervous or calm by nature? Is he aggressive or lethargic?
- c. What is his temper? Does he rarely lose it? Does he have a short fuse?
- d. How does he generally interact with others? Is he somewhat shy and reticent? Is he pushy or domineering?
- e. Does he have a sense of humor? Is he fond of practical jokes? Does he laugh often at himself? At others?

- f. Is he self-confident? Does he boldly proclaim his views, even when unpopular? Does he appear arrogant or meek?
- g. Does his public image agree with his private character? Is he often grim and angry publicly, but good-humored away from the public eye? Or vice versa?
- h. How tenacious is he? Is he easily discouraged, or stubborn, perhaps bull-headed? Does he seem to enjoy battling long odds?

III. Intelligence and ability to cope

- 1. What his colleagues say
 - a. How do his co-workers, friends and enemies rate his professional competence?
 - b. Is he considered brilliant or pedestrian?
 - c. Is he the type of genius who forgets to tie his shoelaces? Can he carefully balance his office's budget, but leave his personal budget in shambles?
 - d. Does he have a sharp or photographic memory? Does he have to write notes to himself to remember even major items? Does he lose the notes regularly?
 - e. Does he have a "natural" instinct that assists him in his job?

IV. Background

- 1. Bio stats as they apply to your story
 - a. When and where of birth; parents' names?
 - b. Dates and places where he has lived? Present residence?
 - c. Education?
 - d. Honors/awards?
 - e. Spouse? Date of marriage? Children and ages? Family accomplishments?
 - f. Highlights of childhood?
 - g. Military service?
 - h. Religious affiliations and activities?
 - i. Chronological account of career?

V. Anecdotes/insight material

- 1. Amusing, informative or profound incidents/mileposts & observations from:
 - a. The subject himself.

- b. Friends and family member.
- c. Co-workers and peers.
- d. Adversaries.

VI. Present status

1. What makes him of public interest?
 - a. What, exactly, does he do?
 - b. How does he do it?
 - c. How do others rate his performance?
 - d. What are the frustrations and rewards of his job?
 - e. Is he happy about his function?
 - f. Anecdotes about his job.

VII. Dreams

1. What he hopes to accomplish
 - a. Is he doing what he always wanted to do? If not, what was his original dream?
 - b. Is he ambitious? What are his ambitions?
 - c. Philosophically, what does he hope to accomplish in life?

VIII. Surroundings

1. Where does he work?
 - a. What does his office look like?
 - b. Does he have symbolic knickknacks on his desk?
 - c. Does he keep pictures of his family?
 - d. Is his office/desk cluttered or fastidiously neat?

Momma

by Pfc. David Alberti

It's 7 a.m. on an already warm Monday morning. As the soldier stands in line at the Consolidated Dining Facility, he squints through hungover eyes at the eggs being mercilessly beaten to a syrupy, yellow-white glop that will soon be his omelet breakfast.

His head hurts. His whiskey-tortured stomach feels as if it is in the early stages of rigor mortis. He wants to go back to bed. He wants to go home. He wants his mother.

“Now, honey. It can’t be that bad!” says a voice from behind the grill.

“Momma, it can be that bad,” moans the young soldier.

“Momma” laughs a warm, compassionate laugh and hands the man his plate.

“Here, soldier, you put a little hot sauce on them eggs. If it don’t make that head feel a little better, it’ll sure make you forget it for a while!”

The soldier smiles, and it doesn’t hurt so much. That’s what Momma does, and that’s why she’s “Momma.”

“Momma” is really Johnetta Colbert, the senior server and union steward at the CDF. But for the last three of her seven years here and to hundreds of soldiers who have passed through Fort Harrison, she has been known affectionately as “Momma.”

Momma is a large, black woman. She is only 5 feet, 4 inches tall, but she is “large” in a strong, maternal way. Her clear, dark eyes and soft, smooth, lineless complexion give her back 20 of her 50 years.

“I ain’t got no children of my own,” she confided. “My and Earl, my husband, we were married 21 years and always wanted ‘em. But we’re separated ... been separated seven years now.” Her voice trailed off, then picked up. “But now I’ve got hundreds of kids. These soldiers like their Momma cookin’ ‘em breakfast.”

And Momma has been cooking breakfast for the troops at Fort Harrison for seven years. When she and her husband separated in 1974, Momma moved from St. Louis, where she was born, to Indianapolis, where she had a close friend. How did she end up working in a mess hall?

“I needed a job! You ain’t got nothin’ if you ain’t got a job. Everybody’s got to have work,” she laughed.

Momma has worked all of her life, starting at the age of 16, cleaning and canning fish in a St. Louis fishery in 1947. She stayed at it for 27 years until she came to Indianapolis.

The morning shift that Momma works six days a week starts serving the troops at 5:30 a.m. In order to catch the Fort Harrison bus from her home in the city, she gets up at 4 a.m. Yet she always shows sympathy to the yawning soldiers who file past her each morning. "Once in a while I get a smart Alec or some wise guy in line. I don't get mad at 'em, just give 'em a good looking at" -- she squinted her eyes, crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow -- "and that usually gets my point across."

"People is people," she explained. "God says to treat everyone like you'd want to be treated. Smile and try and be happy." She feels the soldier has it hard sometimes ... "they (soldiers) deserve a smile and a good meal more than most!"

Momma feels a strong responsibility toward the soldiers she feeds. "She's very professional, very picky about the food and service the troops get," said Walter W. Trotter III, one of Momma's co-workers. "She tries to keep everybody working, and in a good mood if she can."

As the union steward of the dining facility, things are not always that simple. "If there's a problem (with management) she tries to work it out first," Trotter continued. "But if it's the worker who's the problem, she's the first one to kick 'em in the rear."

Momma is working toward retirement now. "I get tired sometimes, and I sure would like to know I could wake up tomorrow and know I don't have to go to work." She looked down at her strong, scarred hands and added, "But I guess after doin' somethin' for a while, you'd miss it if you left it."

After these long years of hard work and long hours, Momma finds strength in her church, the Freedom Baptist Church in Indianapolis. Active as a member of the missionary board, board of trustees and an alto in the choir, Momma said she'd like to work for the church when she leaves the mess hall and her troops. "Maybe I'd work at our (church's) day-care center." She smiled her warm maternal smile at the thought and added, "Yeah. I guess I'd like workin' with the little kids if I could."

Johnetta Colbert, "Momma" to so many young men and women, finishes work

at 2 p.m. each day and walks to the bus stop on strong but tired legs. No family welcomes her home. But each morning weary soldiers come to Mrs. Colbert to find a smile and a laugh and the hot meal that she serves so well.

That's what Momma does. That's why she's Momma.