

David Wilson – University of Arkansas – October 2020
A Reflective Paper on *Stalking the Feature Story*
A model for Students enrolled in University Perspectives

Students can vastly improve research papers with sound writing practices. *Stalking the Feature Story* by William Ruehlmann (1977) is a helpful resource in that regard. An original version is not easily obtained today, but its lessons remain relevant. Ruehlmann, a former journalist, author, high school teacher, film reviewer, faculty advisor, and college professor, wrote that quality feature articles require diligent research and solid writing. The book's title, however, has never attracted a wide audience because not everyone is a feature writer. In spite of that, Ruehlmann offers help for anyone wanting to improve his or her writing. As it turns out, within the pages of *Stalking the Feature Story*, we learn that the attributes of good feature writing can also help create good writing of any kind.

In Ruehlmann's words, his book has two main themes. One is "see for yourself up close" (doing the research), and the other is "write as carefully as you can" (Ruehlmann, p. 4). He outlines recommended practices throughout the book, but four are worth noting here: (a) not trying to impress, (b) eliminating unnecessary verbiage, (c) rewriting, and (d) realizing that good writing contributes to learning and understanding.

Some writers attempt to sound like an insightful genius, but Ruehlmann wrote that this inhibits what they are trying to say. "High altitudes of rhetoric," he wrote, "provide poor pictures of what one is talking about" (p. 26). In short, writers need not use bigger words or longer sentences to impress anyone. They only need to write well.

Ruehlmann also stressed the importance of getting rid of words that cloud the message. "Delete excess," he wrote. "Anything inessential—a paragraph, a line, an unwieldy word—should be cut.... A safe rule of thumb: whatever bores you will most assuredly bore a reader.

Insist on tightness...” (p. 39). Strunk and White (1979) contended that we should strive for writing that is concise. They wrote, “A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences.... This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell” (p. 23). William Zinsser insisted on eliminating clutter from writing. “Examine every word you put on paper,” he wrote. “You’ll find a surprising number that don’t serve any purpose” (Zinsser, 2006, p. 12).

In addition, Ruehlmann made it clear that the writer must often wrestle with each line—cutting, revising, rearranging—to get it right. He wrote, “... hard writing and rewriting improve prose” (p. 97). On this issue, he is in agreement with Zinsser (2006) and Cappon (1991). “Very few sentences come out right the first time,” Zinsser wrote, “or even the third time (p. 9). Cappon wrote “What first springs to mind is seldom good enough. Writing is the art of the second thought” (p. 7).

Finally, Ruehlmann reminds us that the writer is involved in something very noble, able to create, inform, educate, or inspire. Historian Stephen Ambrose said he was attracted to his field by the opportunity, when he wrote, to “contribute to the world’s knowledge” (Ambrose, 1998, Introduction, p. x). Ruehlmann contended that people who write as critics of the arts also have something to contribute. He described them as “a vendor of insights” with the ability to “cast fresh light” on a play, an opera, a concert, a movie, or an art exhibit. Ruehlmann said that if the object of the writing helps people better understand themselves or the world, then “it has a fair claim to being art” (p. 255). Something similar could be said of any piece that an individual writes. If it helps the reader grow, or helps him or her attain a higher level of understanding, it has the potential to be something of great value.

Sources Consulted:

Ambrose, Stephen E. (1998). *Americans at War*. New York: Berkley Books.

Cappon, Rene J. (1991). *The Word: The Associated Press Guide to Good News Writing*. New York: The Associated Press.

Ruehlmann, William. (1977). *Stalking the Feature Story*. Vintage Books: New York.

Strunk, William and White, E.B. (1979). *The Elements of Style*, Third Edition. New York: MacMillan Publishers.

Zinsser, William. (2006). *On Writing Well*. New York: HarperCollins.