A CHECKLIST: FINDING FEATURE ART

Feature pages require good art. To produce good art, you need good ideas. And you need those good ideas *before* stories are written, *before* photos are shot, *before* you start to design the page. Begin searching for ideas before deadline pressures force you to take shortcuts.

Stumped on how to illustrate a page? The following checklist can help guide you to the graphic heart of a feature story:

PHOTO SOLUTIONS

CAN WE SHOOT PHOTOS?

Can we illustrate this story photojournalistically — showing real people in real situations? Look for:

Action
What events or actions are connected with this story? What do the main characters *do* that's interesting? (A reminder: Talking, thinking and sitting at a desk are *not* interesting.) What actions can readers take after they've finished the story?

People
Who is the key player? Or are there several? What kind of portrait shows us the most about them? What emotions do they experience in this story? Can one mood-oriented portrait convey the idea? Is there a situation where emotions and actions intersect?

Places
Can location/setting help tell the story, either:
◆ With a main character posed in a dramatic location?
◆ With several main characters working or interacting?
◆ Without people — focusing instead on buildings or scenery?

Objects
What items are integral to the story? Examples:
◆ Machines
◆ Tools & equipment
◆ Works of art
◆ Vehicles
◆ Clothing
Can they be used as lead art? Expanded into a diagram? Explained in detail in a sidebar?

CAN WE OBTAIN PHOTOS (FROM AN OUTSIDE SOURCE)?

◆ A wire service?

◆ Other media (TV networks, movie studios, professional or student newspapers)?

◆ Organizations (government offices, museums, clubs, stores, companies mentioned in the story)?

◆ The newsroom library? A local library?

◆ The personal archives of people in the story?

◆ Books or magazines (with approval from the publisher or copyright holder)?

◆ Stock photo services?

If photos won't tell the story, then maybe you should consider:

ART SOLUTIONS/PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS

DOES THE STORY FOCUS ON AN ABSTRACT TOPIC? Can one strong image capture that topic and anchor the page? Or are several smaller images needed?

SHOULD WE CREATE A:
◆ *Drawing?* (Is an artist available? Or do we prefer the realism of a photo?)
◆ *Photo illustration?* (Is a photographer available? Or do we want a freer, more fanciful solution?)

To pull strong images out of the story, ask yourself:

CAN WE WRITE THE HEADLINE? A clever headline will often inspire a graphic hook. Wander through the story and look for key words and phrases. Loosen up and noodle around with:

Puns. *Give Peas a Chance. The Noel Prizes. Art and Sole.*

Alliteration and rhyme. *FAX Facts. High-Tech Home Ec. Tool Time.*

TV, movie or song titles. *Born to Run. The Right Stuff. All in the Family. Rebel Without a Clue. Running on Empty. Home Alone.*

Popular quotes, proverbs or slang expressions.

A quote or phrase lifted from the text of the story.

A key word from the story: A name *(Skipper)*. A place *(Gilligan's Island)*. An emotion *(The Crying Game)*. A sound or feeling *(Yum!)*.

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No headline yet? Or is the concept still vague?

BRAINSTORM IMAGES. Wander through your topic again, but this time compile a list of concepts, symbols, visual clichés. Analyze the story in terms of:

Who. What personality types (or stereotypes) are involved? How can you exaggerate their personalities? Are there victims? Villains? Can you use props or symbols to represent people in the story?

What. What objects, feelings or actions are involved? What clichés or symbols come to mind? Isolate them. Mix and match them. What happens if you exaggerate or distort them? See anything humorous? Dramatic?

When. When does the action occur? Are there moments when the topic is most dramatic or humorous? At what times does the topic begin or end? What was the history of this topic?

Where. Where does this topic occur? Where does it start? Finish? If you were filming a movie, what dramatic angles or close-ups would you use?

Why. What does this story mean? What's the end result, the ultimate effect? What's the reason people do it, dread it, love it? And why should we care?

Once you've compiled a list of images, try to combine them in different ways. View them from different angles. Or try these approaches:

◆ **Parody.** There's a world of symbols and clichés out there waiting to be recycled. Some are universal: an egg (frailty, rebirth), a light bulb (creativity), a test tube (research), a gun (danger), an apple (education). You can play with the flag, dollar bills, road signs, game boards. Or parody cultural icons: The Statue of Liberty. The Thinker. Uncle Sam. "American Gothic."

◆ **Combination.** Two images can combine to form a fresh new idea. If your story's about people trapped by credit cards, create a credit-card mousetrap. If your story's about some puzzle at City Hall, create a City Hall jigsaw puzzle. And so on.

◆ **Exaggeration.** Distort size, speed, emotion, repetition. Is there a BIG problem looming? Is something shrinking? Fading? Taken to an extreme, what would this subject look like? How would affected people look?

◆ **Montage.** Arrange a scrapbook of images: photos, artifacts, old engravings from library books. Try to create order, interplay or point of view.

OTHER GRAPHICS SOLUTIONS

By now, you may have found a solution that seems like pure genius to you. But beware: Ideas don't always translate into reality. Your solution must work instantly for hundreds of readers. So before you proceed, run a rough sketch past your colleagues to test their reactions. If it doesn't fly, drop it.

Remember, too: Informational art is usually better than decorational art. Will your illustration inform, or is it just a silly cartoon? Does it make a point, or convey fuzzy emotion? Is it big simply because you need to fill space?

You can still salvage your idea — but consider using it along with:

Infographics. Dress up charts, graphs, maps or diagrams as lead or secondary art. Show your readers how things work, what they mean, where they're headed. Use the design to teach — not just entertain.

Sidebars (with or without art). You can create lists, glossaries, how-to's, polls (see our list on page 165). If you add enough art (mug shots, diagrams, book jackets, etc.) you can make a sidebar carry the whole page.

Big, bold type effects. Often a display headline that's aggressive enough can serve as a page's dominant element — you could even work a piece of art *into* the headline. Or try starting the text with a HUGE initial cap.

Mug shots and liftout quotes. Drop these in wherever pages look gray. Or play them up as dominant elements by adding rules, screens, shadows. Or group a series of mug/quotes in a bold, colorful way.

If you're still trying to dress things up, try a combination of boxes, screens or background wallpaper effects. This is just fancy footwork, however — distracting the reader to disguise your lack of art.

A FINAL WARNING: If you've come this far and still don't have a solid solution, re-think your story. If it's too vague for you, it's probably too vague for readers.