

Good stories capture emotions

Emotion commands attention and creates a relevancy of shared feelings between a character and the reader.

Yet the balance between emotion and news is delicate and, according to professor and head of the Department of Communication at the University of Illinois at Chicago Zizi Papacharissi, journalists have always struggled to manage their own emotions in the name of objectivity or finding appropriate ways to integrate sentiment into a story.

“

A good story offers detail the reader can use to make his or her own judgments and, perhaps, forge an emotional connection with a character.

”

“The most masterful journalists, in their most memorable reporting, attain this perfect balance between emotion and information, color and news, the affective and the cognitive. By contrast, the form of news reporting least memorable is frequently characterized by excessive emotion, and the misinformation that excess produces.”

Eli Sanders, a writer for *The Stranger*, a weekly alternative newspaper in Seattle, found that balance in *The Bravest Woman in Seattle*, a story based on courtroom testimony in which a 34-year old woman described the attack that took the life of her partner. It began this way:

The prosecutor wanted to know about window coverings. He asked: Which windows in the house on South Rose Street, the house where you woke up to him standing over you with a knife that night—which windows had curtains that blocked out the rest of the world and which did not? She answered the prosecutor’s questions, pointing to a map of the small South Park home she used to share with her partner, Teresa Butz, a downtown Seattle property manager. When the two of them lived in this house, it was red, a bit run-down, much loved, filled with their lives together, typical of the neighborhood. Now it was a two-dimensional schematic, State’s Exhibit 2, set on an easel next to the witness stand. She narrated with a red laser pointer for the prosecutor and the jury: These windows had curtains that couldn’t be seen through. These windows had just a sheer fabric.

The story was awarded the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing and you can read it [here](#).

You can read comments about the story from past Pulitzer feature writing winners as well as excerpts from the two other feature writing finalists [here](#).

When describing emotion, less is usually best. Hyperbole does not work. Don't tell the reader how to feel or, except in rare instances, how you feel. "A shocking development..." says, in effect, that something should surprise or dismay. Maybe it will, but that's up to the reader, not the reporter, to decide.

Rather than tell the reader how to feel or use the reporter's feelings as a proxy for what the audience thinks, a good story offers detail the reader can use to make his or her own judgments and, perhaps, forge an emotional connection with a character.

This guide, like many of the others in API's Journalism Essentials section, is largely based on the research and teachings of the Committee of Concerned Journalists — a consortium of reporters, editors, producers, publishers, owners and academics that for 10 years facilitated a discussion among thousands of journalists about what they did, how they did it, and why it was important. The author, Walter Dean, was CCJ training director and API Executive Director Tom Rosenstiel formerly co-chaired the committee.