

PART II
LONG-FORM
STORIES

NARRATIVE IN A SINGLE STORY

Narrative is a writing approach that attempts to convey a picture of the real-life flow and flavor of personalities and events rather than simply providing raw information about them by summarizing and quoting various sources.

In other words, it tells a story.

Often, writers and editors use the somewhat broader term, “storytelling,” when speaking of the narrative approach.

Writers who use this approach employ in-depth reporting to establish a timeline of events and capture the appearance, personal qualities, actions and surroundings of characters, usually as they are in the midst of doing whatever it is that makes them newsworthy.

COMPONENTS

Narrative components include a character or characters engaged in an interesting activity, often a challenge. Those characters move through scenes that are described in enough sensory detail that the reader can visualize the action itself and the surroundings – what the weather, the terrain, or the room looks like, sounds like, smells like. Sometimes, the reporter observes these things directly. Sometimes, the events are reconstructed.

The actions take place over a period of real time: The story is told, in whole or in part, in chronological order. The reader comes to understand, through reminders planted in the description, that the character is being followed through a day, a week, a year – with much of that time summarized while important moments are drawn out in detail. There is a purpose in the narrative, a reason provided to the reader, either implicitly or explicitly, to account for why this individual merits the story-telling treatment we've been giving him. Why should we care? Is there a moral here? A simple gee-whiz factor?

The writer uses a style of telling the story that is appropriate to the subject, and provides hints, often subliminal, as far as the reader is concerned, that help to establish an appropriate atmosphere for the tale that is being told. There is a plot line, devised by the writer, that determines what the reader learns, and when they learn it. In general, in a narrative, the character is introduced, the situation is explained, and then the action unfolds in such a way that the reader is caught up and engaged and wants to find out how it all turns out in the end. In this sense, there is often a mystery, and a number of unanswered questions, that do not unravel until the narrative nears its end. Some editors like to refer to this mystery or these unanswered questions as a promise.

WHEN TO USE IT

Narrative is versatile. It can be used in both features and news stories. It can be used as part of an article, in combination with more traditional journalistic writing: The vignette lede is the most common example of this. But sometimes, if the events and personalities involved in a story provide a suitable narrative arc, an article, and even a multi-part series, can be told either in its majority or in its entirety in narrative form.

PITFALLS

Narrative storytelling entails exhaustive research into areas often ignored by traditional journalism – sensory details, physical descriptions, the temperature that day, the thoughts of the subject, background information about the nature of the activity. Much of that information must remain invisible when the story is actually written: too much kills a narrative. Only the facts that feed the story, keeps the reader involved, makes the necessary points and helps the reader visualize characters and activities should be presented.

Omit material that does not advance the story or help to answer these questions:

What is the point of this story? Why should I care about it? Why should I trust you?

Welcome to the Bunker

by Annie Hull, St. Petersburg Times, 1998

Upstairs at a Clearwater apartment house, a woman suffers like a wasted prizefighter. Her mouth is torn at the corner and her left eye is swollen shut. She took the losing end of something, and now nine people are crouched around in her living room, waiting for answers.

Hull mentions the clipboard, a symbol of the power and responsibility of the case worker, several times.

"I told you, he didn't hit me," she whispers from the couch. She lifts her bloody face, looking past the police officers and paramedics, and fixes her gaze on the petite woman with the clipboard. The one with the greatest power.

"I don't want you to take my kids, Kimberly."

Kim Edelson, Department of Children and Families, withdraws from the living room. She looks around. This is where Mary was supposed to get her life together, in this government apartment with a balcony view of muffler shops and cut-rate motels. Edelson walks into the neat kitchen. An "I love you, mom" magnet gleams on a white refrigerator. In the boys' bedroom, their paintings from day care hang above the pillow they share.

Hull zooms in only on the revealing details. But she does not include details for the sake of description.

But the pink tiles in the bathroom are splattered with blood. A metal towel bar is lying in the sink. Edelson hears a man screaming from the porch outside.

"I didn't do nothin' to her," he shouts, as he is handcuffed and led to a police car. "I'll get your ass, you mother f--- Kimberly."

What to do, what to do, Edelson thinks. In a narrow hallway, she turns to a caseworker. "I don't know 100 percent for sure she's getting her butt kicked."

The caseworker senses Edelson wavering. "If you don't remove these kids, Kim, they're in danger."

Every week, one case rises above the churning sea of others - the custody squabbles, the nests of roaches in cribs and the ungovernable teenagers. There is always one case that sucks the life out of you. Well, here it is, Edelson thinks. And now the whole room is waiting for a decision.

Hull does not reveal the decision, building suspense.

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Kim Edelson doesn't consider herself a crusader for children. She's a grunt for the state, outfitted with a psychology degree and a plastic badge. Each morning, she fills her 32-ounce Javahh! mug with coffee and swan dives into the muddy river of other people's lives. Her tour of duty on the child protection unit has lasted almost five years, twice as long as the average child abuse investigator.

Microscopic level of detail

What keeps Edelson on the job is her insatiable quest for answers. It's like safecracking. If she can unlock a family's secrets, she believes there's a chance for repair.

She drives through her territory in north Pinellas, past the flaking duplexes and the subdivisions with dolphins on the entry gates. The job has bestowed upon her an X-ray vision. She can see the secrets. They take place under Little Mermaid sheets and beneath framed scrolls of the 23rd Psalm.

"Hi, I'm Kim Edelson with the Department of Children and Families," she says from the doorstep. Some homes smell of potpourri, some of marijuana. Edelson squeezes into bunk beds, clipboard in her lap, pen in hand, and leads into her questions. Does Mommy hit you with a closed fist or open hand? Who cooks dinner? Do you ever get to stay alone at night?

The adults usually linger nervously in a nearby room.

But children are still children, no matter what they've endured.

"I like robots."

"I have a brown tooth that fell out."

"My class learned all about Abraham Lincoln."

"We're going to Six Flags this summer."

And then, shyly, the secrets:

"Mommy doesn't come home at night."

"He puts his monkey on my monkey."

"Mama's boyfriend gave me Jack Daniel's."

"Grandpa lets me suck on his balloon."

Amazing, the code words pedophiles invent. Edelson worries about the children who cannot yet speak for themselves, like the infant with the spiral leg fracture that could only have been caused by forcible twisting.

Hard evidence? That's difficult to come by in this job. There is the occasional lab result that shows gonorrhea cultures in the throat of a 9-year-old, or stripes of scar tissue from a leather strap.

Parents curse Edelson. They throw hexes on her. They accuse her of being part of a government plot to destroy families. "Do you have kids?" they scream.

"Yeah, two," she sometimes lies. "Now let's get back to you."

Edelson, 31, is supposed to possess the wisdom of Benjamin Spock and the sixth sense of Joe Friday, all for \$ 27,000 a year. "Some of my clients who dance at nudie bars make more money than I do," she says.

In one short sentence, Hull sums up a physical and mental description of her profile subject.

But she persists. She keeps near her desk a vacation photo of a white-water rafting trip. In it, a brown-haired woman is soaked by the shooting rapids but gripping the oars in sheer defiance. That's Kim Edelson.

Five feet tall in her scuffed flats, apologetic in demeanor, but absolutely dogged.

Investigators are like the Marines. They're the first to land on the shores of a distressed family, and the first to take the blame when things go horribly wrong, as they did last fall, when nine Florida children under protective services died of abuse.

Here, Hull introduces her news peg — 840 words into the story, showing that you can ease into it.

The child deaths sparked a proposed restructuring of the child protection system in Florida. Legislators are now deciding whether sheriff's deputies could do a better job than Edelson and her fellow investigators at Department of Children and Families (DCF).

The job is not for law-and-order types accustomed to resolution through handcuffs. It's a constant juggling of assessed risks. Factor in a client base that can be unpredictable - addictions, low-functioning intelligence, mental illness, violent tendencies - and every day becomes something of a gamble.

"You dream about red flags," Edelson says. "And you pray a lot."

Hull weaves in important background info and sprinkles such info throughout the story.

Edelson works District 5, which combines Pinellas and Pasco counties, where an average of 880 child abuse reports are investigated every month and 1,707 children are currently under protective supervision.

A week in the field is enough to flatten the normal human.

Hull repeats the bunker metaphor several times later in the story, creating a theme.

The bunker of child protective services goes like this all day long, every day. The special Fat Tuesday potluck lunch is festive but followed by two child removals that same afternoon.

Sometimes the bunker is a nursery. Sometimes it's a day care. Sometimes it's a neutral visitation site for parents who've lost temporary custody of their children.

Outside Edelson's office, a blond 3-month-old in a child carrier is propped on a secretary's desk. A foster mom brought him here for a scheduled visit with his parents, who are crack addicts. They are already a half-hour late. The morning slips by as he waits.

A supervisor on the unit picks him up and sweeps him across the carpet, and he gurgles happily, his white booties flying through the air.

"Hey, sweetie," Edelson says, sidestepping the waltz. "No one's coming to see you?"

The staff kisses him goodbye as he is returned to his foster home. His blue eyes are alight, his cheeks flushed. "How could anyone stand you up?" the supervisor asks.

How could parents do any of the things they do?

Edelson pulls into a McDonald's drive-through to buy a Happy Meal for a 5-year-old girl buckled in her back seat. As if a Happy Meal would help. Edelson is taking the girl to a shelter home because she just watched dad bash mom's head into a bloody pulp against the kitchen sink.

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The boys are coloring with crayons at a nurse's station when their mother suddenly appears in the hallway of the emergency room. "Mama!" the 4-year-old shouts, bouncing down off the chair in his Hercules sneakers. But Mary doesn't reach for him. She stands back and watches.

After 6,000 words, Hull circles back to the beginning for this ending.

A flash of recognition sweeps across the boy's face. He realizes what's happening. He looks up at Edelson, and then quickly turns back to his mother. But Edelson has already taken his hand and is pulling him toward the electric doors. A wild, wounded howl fills the polished hallway. Another case worker quickly scoops up the younger brother.

In the parking lot, Edelson helps strap the boys into a Toyota. They are both hysterical. They have nothing for their journey. No favorite toys, no pajamas, no blankets silky with familiarity. They cry for 24 miles to a shelter home in St. Petersburg.

The boys don't just cry the entire way to St. Pete. They cry for 24 miles. Hull is specific.

In the silence, Edelson stands alone in the parking lot. She holds a clipboard to her chest. Always the clipboard.

To wear the badge of a child protection investigator is to hit the ground running Monday morning and to lie in bed Friday trying to shut out the last reel of scenery:

The way a 4-year-old held your neck as you carried him away from his mother, his face, crying, through the car windshield.

Good night, child. Where will you wake in 20 years?

INVESTIGATIONS: THE OUTLINE FORM

The outline form of an investigative story is one that opens with a section introducing each of the main points to be explored and then proceeds through a fuller explanation of each point – devoting a section or more to each.

COMPONENTS

An introductory section that sets the stage with a lede that distills the essence of the story and a series of bulleted paragraphs laying out the key findings or themes one by one. This introductory section is followed by a series of sections of roughly equal lengths, under subheads that correspond, sequentially, back to the bullets.

WHEN TO USE IT

This is a simple and basically fail-safe approach to organizing any complex investigative or explanatory story that involves exposition of a series of “findings” or themes.

ADVANTAGES

1. This form forces the reporter to identify the three or four key findings that matter most – and put all of the energy of the story into developing those handful of points.
2. It provides a foolproof way to avoid meandering, notebook-emptying stories that flit from point to point but leave readers feeling lost in the shuffle. The “outline” gives the story its bones. It walks readers through each issue, one at a time, and gives them a sense of logical flow.
3. It provides a disciplined structure for planning and sticking to budgeted story lengths. For example – if the nature of the story justifies 50 inches, that might suggest organizing the story around three major findings. This would allow room for an intro section of about 10 inches to tell what the story will be and lay out the bullets, and three sections of about 12-15 inches to develop each of them.

PITFALLS

Outlining can be overly rigid and prevent some points from being adequately treated. Even with the most thoughtful distillation of major points, “Bullet 2” may take twice as long as “Bullet 1” to develop. Therefore, flexibility must be maintained. Sometimes one bullet may require two corresponding sections farther down in the story.

The value of this form is illustrated nicely in day one of Dan Tracy's 3-part series on the city of Orlando's deal to hand over the old Navy base to a wealthy developer. As the following example shows, it was a long, wide-ranging story covering a multitude of complex subjects – both political and financial.

But the "outline form" tamed it and made it readable.

This form worked well on a 130-inch story reported over many months. So applying the same principles, the outline form can work on stories that are half that length, or a third that length.

This is a story that was published at 133 inches, so only the introductory section is reproduced here. But within that intro section are the bones of the whole story. And the "outline form" allows the writer to break down this complex subject into seven digestible sections that follow the logical order laid out in the intro. Thus, despite its length, the story is still a smooth read. The same organizing principles will work on stories of 45 inches or 60 inches.

OUTLINE and SUBHEAD TITLES

- I. INTRODUCTORY SECTION: 25"
- II. ONE DEAL, TWO MAYORS: 13"
- III. PRESSURE FROM HOOD: 14"
- IV. A GOOD DEAL GETS BETTER: 18"
- V. STILL MORE BREAKS: 23"
- VI. DEVELOPERS CONTROL DISTRICT: 22"
- VII. NOT A CHEAP PLACE TO LIVE 15"

This nugget graf lays out the full sweep of the story.

This paragraph sets up the sequence of bulleted points that telegraphs the story's overarching structure.

BULLET ONE: Foreshadows what will be the first section of the story following the introductory section. That is Section II, 15 inches long, under the subhead "ONE DEAL, TWO MAYORS". It also is the place where general background about the Navy base will go.

Sunday, November 4, 2001

NAVY-BASE DEALS TURN DIRT TO GOLD

ORLANDO'S RUSH TO DEVELOP THE FORMER NAVAL TRAINING CENTER PUT THE PRIME LAND -- AND PLENTY MORE -- IN THE HANDS OF A BILLIONAIRE CHICAGO DEVELOPER.

By Dan Tracy
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

When the federal government ordered the Orlando Naval Training Center closed in 1993, dozens of pages of fine print laid out a pecking order of who could lay claim to the valuable property.

Other branches of the military, state and local public agencies and the homeless were first in line. Billionaire developers were not on the list.

But eight years later, one of the nation's wealthiest families owns the 1,093-acre base in Orlando. And they got it for next to nothing, while the city of Orlando lost a chance to use the base for a broader public benefit. Aided by low-interest loans and other incentives quietly doled out by the city, the developers even control a small government created to help them build an upscale housing enclave there.

A partnership controlled by the Pritzkers of Chicago -- owners of the posh Hyatt hotel chain -- two years ago paid just \$7.6 million to secure title to nearly two square miles of Central Florida's choicest land in a complex series of deals orchestrated with the city. The \$6,900 an acre they paid for the base would have been a good price for land in rural Lake County, let alone in downtown Orlando.

An Orlando Sentinel investigation of the behind-the-scenes deal-making since that time shows that the Pritzkers have been able to parlay a \$19 million investment into a real-estate gold mine now worth at least \$130 million. They have succeeded, in large part, because:

- They had help from two Orlando mayors, past and present. Mayor Glenda Hood pressed passionately for development of the defunct complex as part of her administration's legacy. Her predecessor, ex-Mayor Bill Frederick, was briefly a Pritzker business partner in a key phase of the family's drive to buy the base.

BULLET TWO: This bullet gets to the meat of the story, and because of that will take three succeeding sections to develop. The subheads are
Section III "PRESSURE FROM HOOD"
Section IV "A GOOD DEAL GETS BETTER"
Section V "STILL MORE BREAKS"

- Hood and her staff treated public ownership of the base as if it were a liability, never giving serious consideration to other options beyond unloading it quickly and cheaply for a private housing and commercial development. The city owned the so-called NTC for less than a day. Officials were so eager to close the deal with the Pritzkers that they fashioned an unprecedented, multimillion-dollar package of loans and other breaks that included exempting the developers from normal planning reviews. More clogged roads may be the future price Orlando pays.

BULLET THREE: This bullet focuses on a unique facet of the story that requires its own section to explain – the formation of a "community development district." That will appear later as...
Section VI "DEVELOPERS CONTROL DISTRICT"

- The city approved a "community development district" government for the Pritzkers, enabling them to issue \$76 million in tax-free bonds and legally steer as much as a third of the proceeds to their own company. Future homeowners will repay much of that debt with assessments on their property stretched over three decades. What residents will get for that portion of the bond money are otherwise unmarketable scraps of raw land slated for such uses as drainage areas and roads. The price commanded by the Pritzkers was about \$91,000 an acre. That's 13 times what they paid per acre just two years earlier.

BULLET FOUR: This bullet covers what will be the seventh and final section of the story, which also contains overall wrap-up quotes and a good kicker for the story.
Section VII "NOT A CHEAP PLACE TO LIVE"

- In its drive to sign an agreement with the Pritzkers, the city secured little in return for the general public beyond land for schools and the increased tax revenue -- \$1.27 million a year -- that would come with any large new development. Homes in what is billed as "a traditional Orlando neighborhood" will start at \$150,000 for a condo -- well out of the range of most residents -- and range beyond \$1 million. The Orlando area's median home price is \$125,000.

FINALLY: The introductory section wraps up by flowing out of the bullets into a few grafs of general response, general reaction and more overall context.

The fruits of the city's arrangement with the Pritzkers soon will be on display as the razed base is transformed into Baldwin Park, a self-contained village of houses, apartments, shops and offices that already has attracted a list of 2,000 potential homeowners. The first of about 8,000 residents should begin moving in late next year.

But anyone who doesn't live or work in Baldwin Park may have few compelling reasons to go there beyond some shops, restaurants, offices and a modest network of parks.

Rollins College business Professor Barry Render said the city's handling of the Navy base "appalled" him.

Calling the giveaway a "wasted" opportunity for taxpayers, Render said, "It's very generous what the city did. It just shows a sort of short-sightedness and an immediate need to act without thinking things through real closely."

Hood bristles at such criticisms, saying Orlando's efforts will ensure the former base becomes "one of the premiere neighborhoods in our city. It's going to do nothing but gain in value."

The Orlando City Council stayed mostly on the sidelines during the base dealings, relying on Hood to take the lead and provide periodic updates. Some members were not even aware of the full extent of the city's help to the developers and were almost blase when asked about it in interviews.

"Any developer would love to have government share or minimize risk to the greatest extent possible," said council member Don Ammerman, himself a commercial real estate expert.

Patty Sheehan, whose district includes the base, said of the Pritzkers: "Those guys sure know how to make a buck, don't they?"

INVESTIGATIONS: ANECDOTAL FORM

This approach is effective for telling a story where the reporting has exposed a single, stunning finding but has also unearthed an abundance of illustrative and outrageous examples.

Where the strength of the outline form is knitting together a variety of unrelated angles under a single framework, the anecdotal form works well when the core concept can be set up in one stroke and then hammered home with one case study after another.

This form was used to classic effect in Donald Barlett and James Steele's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1988 report on so-called "rifle-shot" provisions buried deep in the U.S. tax code that resulted in millions of dollars worth of all-but-invisible tax breaks for wealthy, politically connected Americans.

April 10, 1988

HOW THE INFLUENTIAL WIN BILLIONS IN SPECIAL TAX BREAKS

By Donald L. Bartlett and James B. Steele
PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

The story begins with a hypothetical, asking average readers to visualize themselves getting the kind of outrageous tax break that will be subsequently exposed. This imaginary "anecdote" draws the reader right into the story because it actually makes the reader a character, of sorts, in the story. Contrast this approach with a more traditional approach that might simply spit out the core finding.

Now the story efficiently turns the corner into the real outrages about to be exposed. And the pacing picks up.

And now we have arrived at the first actual case study. Think about an alternative approach that might have been used. The Ballard anecdote might have been used as the actual lead of the story. That could have been done very effectively, but it could have made the lead more rushed because too much information would have had to be introduced too quickly.

The more daring, conversational approach taken here has already hooked readers by this point, freeing up the writers to introduce Mrs. Ballard in a more leisurely fashion, while at the same time they begin to explain the complex concept of a "rifle-shot" tax break.

Only now, 300 words into the story, do we reach what might be thought of as the traditional nut graf. Other writers might have chosen to make this a simple "hard lead" of a fast-paced, hard-hitting story. But would you the reader have been as hooked by that approach? Would you be feeling the same outrage that you feel by this point? Would you keep reading?

Imagine, if you will, that you are a tall, bald father of three living in a Northeast Philadelphia rowhouse and selling aluminum siding door-to-door for a living.

Imagine that you go to your congressman and ask him to insert a provision in the federal tax code that exempts tall, bald fathers of three living in Northeast Philadelphia and selling aluminum siding for a living from paying taxes on income from door-to-door sales.

Imagine further that your congressman cooperates, writes that exemption and inserts it into pending legislation. And that Congress then actually passes it into law.

Lots of luck.

The more than 80 million low- and middle-taxes just don't get that kind of personal break. Nor for that matter do most upper-middle-class and affluent Americans.

But some people do.

Like Mrs. Joseph J. Ballard Jr., widow of a socially prominent Texas businessman. Geraldine Ballard lives in a \$600,000 home in an exclusive Fort Worth enclave whose residents include Perry R. Bass, patriarch of the billionaire Bass oil and investments clan, and concert pianist Van Cliburn.

For her, tax writers have drafted the following paragraph that they intend to insert in tax legislation that Congress soon will take up:

For purposes of section 2656(b)(8) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986, an individual who receives an interest in a charitable remainder unitrust shall be deemed to be the only noncharitable beneficiary of such trust if the interest in the trust passed to the individual under the will of a decedent who resided in Tarrant County, Texas, and died on October 28, 1983, at the age of 75, with a gross estate not exceeding \$12.5 million, and the individual is the decedent's surviving spouse.

The paragraph will, if enacted into law, allow the estate of Geraldine Ballard's late husband to escape payment of an estimated \$4 million in federal taxes that the Internal Revenue Service says the estate owes.

Tailored to meet the needs of a single taxpayer, the provision is just one of scores of similar special-interest deals awaiting congressional action.

Each would exempt a specific individual or corporation, or group of individuals and corporations - usually unnamed - from taxes that people and businesses in similar situations are obliged to pay.

When Geraldine Ballard was asked about the provision, she replied:

"I really just can't explain it because I don't understand it myself. . . . I have no earthly idea what they are doing. The Texas Bank of Commerce in Arlington handles it. It's a trust. I wish I could help you.

"I presume you are referring to the bill that Jim Wright was putting through?"

"Jim Wright" is the Fort Worth Democrat who is speaker of the House of Representatives.

Now we get a long passage with more background and exposition, but instead of bogging the story down it simply deepens the sense of intrigue and adds to the outrage factor. We're beginning to meet the real operators who made all these deals happen – and the curtain is slowly lifted on the broadening scope of the story.

A question to ask: Could a story of this depth and complexity have been told as well with a traditional lead and nut graf "before the jump"? Maybe. Would readers have been as engaged? Probably not.

This is a great illustration of why it's never good to be locked into formulaic approaches to even to the most hard-hitting stories.

The anecdotal approach is carried forward through the story through a long series of additional examples of "rifle-shot" provisions. They are framed with a simple, two-part set up...

THE LAW....

THE BENEFICIARY....

When Congress passed the Tax Reform Act of 1986, radically overhauling the Internal Revenue Code, Rep. Dan Rostenkowski (D., Ill.), chairman of the tax-writing House Ways and Means Committee, hailed the effort as "a bill that reaches deep into our national sense of justice - and gives us back a trust in government that has slipped away in the maze of tax preferences for the rich and powerful."

In fact, Rostenkowski and other self-styled reformers created a new maze of unprecedented favoritism. Working in secret, they wove at least 650 exemptions - preferences, really, for the rich and powerful - through the legislation, most written in cryptic legal and tax jargon that conceals the identity of the beneficiaries.

When they were finished, thousands of wealthy individuals and hundreds of businesses were absolved from paying billions upon billions of dollars in federal income taxes. It was, an Inquirer investigation has established, the largest tax giveaway in the 75-year history of the federal income tax.

There were provisions that accorded special treatment not available under either old or new tax laws. There were provisions that excused taxpayers from complying with IRS or court decisions holding them liable for payment of taxes. And there were provisions that merely granted exemptions from the tax law - licenses, if you will, not to pay taxes.

The recipients were, among others, White House dinner guests, members of Forbes magazine's directory of the 400 wealthiest Americans, corporate executives, major campaign contributors, companies that have slashed the pension or health-care benefits of their retirees, foreign investors, corporate raiders, former officials of federal agencies, personal or business friends of members of Congress, and businesses and individuals who paid little or no tax in the past.

That was Round 1.

Now, Congress is preparing to do it all over again, this time adding the private tax provisions to a so-called technical-corrections bill to remedy defects in the Tax Reform Act of 1986.

The cost of the latest round of special deals - many of which are still being written - already is approaching the multibillion-dollar range.

Whatever the final figure, it will come on top of the \$10.6 billion outlay for such concessions in 1986. That \$10.6 billion, by the way, was Congress' official estimate; the ultimate price tag, Inquirer projections show, could run two to three times that amount.

Even the understated \$10.6 billion cost was substantial. It exceeds every dollar paid in federal income tax for the next five years or more by low- and middle-income residents of Philadelphia.

As might be expected, congressional tax-writing committees prefer to shroud their work in secrecy, writing the private provisions in obscure language, as in the case of Geraldine Ballard. A sampling of exemptions from the 1986 act, and the beneficiaries of those exemptions as determined in an Inquirer investigation, illustrates the practice:

THE LAW. In the case of any pre-1987 open year, the amendment made by section 1275(b) shall not apply to any domestic corporation if . . . during the fiscal year which ended May 31, 1986, such corporation was actively engaged directly or through a subsidiary in the conduct of a trade or business in the Virgin Islands and such trade or business consists of business related to marine activities and . . . such corporation was incorporated on March 31, 1983, in Delaware.

THE BENEFICIARY. That paragraph describes Bizcap Inc., a Dallas firm whose principal stockholder - and thus the major beneficiary of the tax break - was William H. Bowen, a 71-year-old

INVESTIGATIONS: NARRATIVE FORM

Narrative is a writing approach that attempts to convey a picture of the real-life flow and flavor of personalities and events rather than simply providing raw information about them by summarizing and quoting various sources.

In other words, it tells a story.

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WHEN TO USE IT

In investigative stories, narrative can provide the human element, the face of the victim, the wrongdoer, the investigator. It gives a three-dimensional feel to the traditional documentation and digging that investigative pieces require.

COMPONENTS

Narrative components include a character or characters engaged in an interesting activity, often a challenge. Those characters move through scenes that are described in enough sensory detail that the reader can visualize the action and the surroundings – what the weather, the terrain or the room looks like, sounds like, smells like. Sometimes, the reporter observes these things directly. Sometimes, the events are reconstructed. The actions take place over a period of real time: The story is told, in whole or in part, in chronological order. The reader comes to understand, through reminders planted in the description, that the character is being followed through a day, a week, a year – with much of that time summarized while important moments are drawn out in detail. There is a purpose in the narrative, a reason provided to the reader, implicitly or explicitly, to account for why this individual merits the story-telling treatment we've been giving him. Why should we care? Is there a moral here? A simple gee-whiz factor?

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PITFALLS

Sentimentality is a danger. Victims are human, too, and it's a temptation to go overboard in being sympathetic to them. It's also a temptation for the investigative writer to force the issue, to play up qualities and characteristics to ratchet up the drama and importance of the story. Careful judgment is needed in selecting what individuals best represent the issue.

Here is an example of an investigative story that combines elements of powerful narrative with strong investigative reporting. The case lends itself to a narrative approach because the family became involved in the investigation.

Along with a vivid description of a worker's death and the confusing aftermath, there is a story of family members who tried to find out who was to blame and, in the process, stumbled upon a regulatory agency riddled with problems.

A gripping lede puts the reader in the home of the survivors and to some extent in the trench with man who died. It also sets up the job-safety problem and investigative nut graphs that become clearer in the next few passages.

The family's desire for justice exposes problems, not just at the plumbing company but with the officials who are supposed to enforce safety regulations.

December 21, 2003

WHEN WORKERS DIE

A trench caves in; a young worker is dead. Is it a crime?

By David Barstow
THE NEW YORK TIMES

CINCINNATI — As the autopsy confirmed, death did not come right away for Patrick M. Walters. On June 14, 2002, while working on a sewer pipe in a trench 10 feet deep, he was buried alive under a rush of collapsing muck and mud. A husky plumber's apprentice, barely 22 years old, Mr. Walters clawed for the surface. Sludge filled his throat. Thousands of pounds of dirt pressed on his chest, squeezing and squeezing until he could not draw another breath.

His mother, Michelle Marts, was the first in his family to hear.

"You just stand there like you're suspended in blank space," she said. She remembers being enveloped by a paralyzing numbness. He was her only child. She could not hear or breathe or move. Was this, she found herself wondering, what Patrick felt?

She called Patrick's father, her ex-husband, Jeff. "It literally knocked me off my feet," he said. "I lay there, right there on the floor, screaming and crying."

Marts next called Patrick's wife, Crystal. "I remember running upstairs and just hugging my kid and thinking, 'How am I going to tell her,'" Crystal Walters said.

Soon after, an investigator from the coroner's office called Marts. He could not have been nicer. Such a tragedy, he said. But by then, the first insistent questions had begun to form. Her son had often spoken about his fear of being buried alive. He had described being sent into deep trenches without safety equipment, like the large metal boxes placed in excavations to create a sheltered work space.

"Was there a trench box?" she asked the investigator. He paused, she recalled. "He says, 'Ma'am, no safety procedures were followed. None.'"

"He was just so disgusted."

Other officials shared his disgust, starting with the federal safety investigator who stood over the trench that night as Patrick Walters' body was pulled from the mud. Only two weeks before, the same investigator had caught men from the same company — Moeves Plumbing — working unprotected in a 15-foot-deep trench, a blatant violation of federal safety laws.

One of the men was Patrick Walters, who, when questioned by the investigator, had described a host of unsafe work practices.

"They don't like me on these jobs a lot," Walters had volunteered, according to a tape recording of the interview.

"Why is that?"

"Because, I don't like getting in the holes — even with a box."

The inspector's boss, the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration's top official in Cincinnati, was angry too. He knew Moeves Plumbing well. In 1989, he had confronted the company about another death. The circumstances were nearly identical: a deep trench, no box, a man buried alive.

But their professional disgust could not touch the rage of Walters' parents. A veteran plumber himself, Jeff Walters knew the treachery of trench walls. Moeves Plumbing would deny any wrongdoing and tell OSHA it was trying to do the right thing on safety. But to Jeff Walters, sending an untrained, unskilled apprentice into an unprotected, unstable, rain-saturated, 10-foot-deep trench was flat-out criminal.

“You done killed my boy!” he recalls screaming that night on the phone to Moeves Plumbing.

His first instinct was revenge by shotgun. His wife and members of his church intervened. They prayed and wept, and then they resolved to seek their justice from the authorities.

The entire family mobilized around this goal. During the next six months, they gathered records, interviewed witnesses and learned all they could about OSHA. Blue-collar and self-reliant, they did not expect much from government. Indeed, their research turned up plenty of unflattering descriptions of OSHA. Inept. Timid. Overmatched. Jeff Walters knew OSHA as the guys who would sweat the small stuff — show up at a job site and write up a \$5,000 fine for a frayed power cord.

Even so, year after year, grieving families across America depend on OSHA to stand for them, and for their dead. Surely, the Walters family reasoned, if OSHA had any purpose it was to keep employers from killing workers by flouting safety rules.

It is a federal crime for an employer to cause a worker’s death by willfully violating safety laws. To initiate a prosecution, OSHA must first refer the case to the Department of Justice. Yet even in the very worst cases, that is something the agency does only a small fraction of the time.

To the Walters family, though, it seemed like such a small thing to ask — a simple request from one bureaucracy to another to take a look, consider the evidence and decide whether to prosecute. That was it.

“It looked like an open-and-shut case,” Marts said. “No box. Put down in a hole. Buried alive.”

But it was dangerous work, and her son had known it. He told his mother of being buried to his waist in one trench. He told his father of being lowered into trenches on the bucket of a backhoe, leaving him no ladder to escape a collapse. “I just ask God never to let me die that way,” he said to his wife.

His family urged him to put up a fuss. But he pointed out that he was only an apprentice, easily replaced. If he were seen as a troublemaker, he worried, his bosses would find an excuse to get rid of him. Their attitude, he told his father, was “either do it or go home.”

In truth, he did not have many better alternatives. His troubles in school had begun when he was 10, the same year his parents’ marriage broke up. By 16, he was running afoul of the law. An episode involving stolen guns and then a police chase resulted in a stretch in juvenile detention.

“The best thing that ever happened to him,” his father said.

Still, an arrest record and a G.E.D. earned him only dead-end temporary jobs in factories. He cleaned animal cages. Whatever the dangers, he saw Moeves Plumbing as his big break.

Small and family owned, with about 50 employees, Moeves (pronounced MAY-vis) had agreed to pay for his four-year apprentice program. That would mean a plumber’s license and \$25 an hour and a decent middle-class life for him and Crystal and their son, Christen.

“He was looking at Moeves like this is my road, my way forward,” his father said. There was even talk of them one day forming Walters & Son Plumbing.

It was a hard road for \$8.50 an hour. But he stuck with it. He put in hard days on the job, then went to school three nights a week. School records show that he missed only three classes. His grades were good.

“A miracle,” his mother said.

His father saw a boy becoming a man.

Every trench is a potential death trap. Trench walls give way at any time, often without warning. The deeper the trench the greater the risk, which is magnified further if the soil is loose or wet. Hundreds are killed or injured in trenches each year.

That is why federal safety laws require employers to take special precautions for trenches deeper than 5 feet. The walls must be sloped back at a safe angle or shored up with bracing. If a trench box is used instead, it must be big and sturdy enough to with-

As the grieving family gears up for action, we get a hint of foreshadowing that some regulatory officials may stand in the way of their quest for justice. First, though, why was Patrick Walters digging ditches for a living?

Next the writer gives a very clear explanation of the danger of the job and the reason such an apparently simple task as digging a hole by hand must be regulated.

stand the tremendous forces of a collapse. A “competent person” — someone trained in excavation safety — must inspect the trench before work begins and then daily thereafter.

From a parking lot, Charles Shelton watched the workers from Moeves Plumbing. One was Patrick Walters. Shelton approached with a video camera. The trench, about 15 feet deep, was neither sloped nor shored. There was a box, but it was far too small — only 8 feet tall — to be effective. And Shelton had seen men working outside that undersize shelter.

He shut the job down on a Friday afternoon. On Monday, at 9:22 a.m., he turned on his tape recorder to interview Patrick Walters. “Employees were working in an excavation that was unprotected,” Shelton began, “and I’ve got this young man, he was exposed to the trench.”

His voice was noticeably nervous, but Walters described a company that did not follow the basic requirements of trench safety. He told of supervisors who tolerated dangerous shortcuts and made little effort to enforce safety rules.

Shelton asked about safety meetings.

“We’ve had a couple,” Walters said. “They don’t do it regularly anymore.” He then volunteered that the company no longer had a safety manager.

“How long has he been gone?”

“I can’t remember. It’s been a while since we had one.”

It had been more than three months.

The safety manager, Robert W. Schum, who left Moeves Plumbing with his son and formed his own company, said in a recent interview that his duties had actually involved “very little safety.” His main job, he explained, was managing the warehouse. Sometimes he would check toolboxes for frayed power cords. That was about it. In about two years as safety manager, he said, he could not recall giving any training on trench safety.

The month after he left, Moeves Plumbing sent three supervisors to a training course on trench safety. Two of them — including the field supervisor for all Moeves trench crews — subsequently supervised the digging of the very trench that now so troubled Shelton.

In his inspection report, Shelton wrote that he had recommended several immediate changes. Moeves Plumbing needed “someone competent in trenching” to train workers or “at least to identify good and bad trenches and to provide trench protection and enforce compliance,” he told a senior company official.

His advice went unheeded. But the company’s owner, Linda Moeves, did take one step. She called the OSHA director in Cincinnati, William M. Murphy, to complain.

“She was agitated,” Murphy recalled. Shelton had asked for records to show that she was training employees in trench safety and seeking to enforce safety rules. “Why does he need to be asking to see these records?” Murphy recalled her asking.

He remembers telling her she would do well to show that she had trained her employees properly. “And she said, ‘You know that since that last case we’ve been trying to do the right thing.’”

Bill Murphy had not forgotten that last case, 13 years before.

More than two decades as the agency’s chief in Cincinnati, Murphy had become a legendary figure within OSHA. He and his office had repeatedly received OSHA’s highest awards for aggressive enforcement. His personal history gave him an appreciation for the lives of men like Patrick Walters. He was raised in Scott County, Tenn., one of the poorest counties in the country. The son of a coal miner and farmer who fathered 22 children, he was the first in his family to graduate from high school.

When Shelton told him about the problems at Moeves Plumbing, Murphy’s mind reeled back to 1989, to that last case and to how afterward Linda Moeves had pledged to do the right thing.

Clint Daley, an inexperienced laborer like Patrick Walters, had been digging a sewer line with a backhoe operator named Dan Callahan. The trench, 12 feet deep, was neither sloped nor shored up. There was no trench box. Daley was in the trench when the walls cracked. Callahan shouted a warning.

Next comes a man who might be expected to do the right thing and tries...

“By the time he got turned around, it caved in,” he said later in a deposition.

What made Clint Daley’s death particularly outrageous to Murphy was that his inspectors had three times before warned Moeves Plumbing’s crews about trench safety — in 1984, 1985 and 1986. They had issued safety pamphlets, and a \$700 fine.

Yet Moeves Plumbing had not bought any trench-safety equipment. Nor had it provided any safety training, on trenches or anything else.

Murphy might have referred the Daley case to the Justice Department for prosecution. He had, after all, concluded that Daley died because Moeves Plumbing willfully violated safety rules. But Murphy’s response was tempered by his assessment of Linda Moeves.

Her husband, the company’s founder, had died in 1987, and though she had helped out in the office, it was not clear she had the skills to run a plumbing business. Her previous job was social director of a racket club.

Murphy admired the way she had hung tough in the cutthroat contracting world. And when she was interviewed by OSHA about Daley’s death, she pleaded ignorance — about the prior OSHA warnings, about the \$700 fine, even about there being federal safety rules for trenches.

“She was too willing to trust her employees to do the right thing,” Murphy said.

Moeves promised deep changes. She quickly enrolled in a trench-safety seminar. She bought hydraulic shoring equipment. She saw that her supervisors and backhoe crews learned trench safety. There would be regular safety meetings, a new safety director and a safety committee to correct hazards.

She also established a written safety policy. Trenches deeper than 4 feet would be sloped or shored up “as required by OSHA standards,” the policy said. What’s more, trenches would be inspected daily by Moeves or a field supervisor. Employees who broke the rules would be disciplined, and fired after a fourth offense.

Ultimately, Murphy fined Moeves Plumbing \$13,700 for the violations that killed Mr. Daley.

During the next three years, Moeves Plumbing was inspected five times and cited for seven relatively minor violations. Murphy concluded that Moeves had learned a painful lesson.

Now, Shelton’s inspection raised some pointed questions about the permanence of that lesson. Court records show that Moeves Plumbing’s safety committee had not existed for years. Nor were there records of any trench inspections or of employees disciplined for safety violations. Several Moeves workers said they could not recall Moeves or her supervisors ever directing them to take precautions against trench collapses.

“I was unpleasantly surprised,” Murphy said. “I had thought she had gotten her act together.”

What made these failures particularly egregious, Murphy believed, was that Moeves Plumbing should have known better, given how routinely it dug trenches. Shelton was not permitted to be interviewed for this article, but records show that he told a police officer that he was considering pushing for criminal charges.

His boss was, too.

Murphy had long felt that OSHA needed to do more to encourage criminal prosecution. If a company “cheats on paying their taxes,” he said, “we will charge them with a felony. Why would we be afraid to do that if they take one of their employees’ lives?”

Over the years, he said, he had seen too many companies pay insignificant fines and keep on committing the same violations with the same results.

“You’ve got to put people in jail,” he said.

Yet there was a problem: “Nobody in OSHA has ever really been interested in prosecuting these kinds of cases.”

The reasons were complex — scarce resources, fear of bad publicity, a collective belief that the Justice Department does not like these cases — but the result, he said, was layer upon layer, year after year, of endless review.

And then there were the lawyers.

Context given for the violations, which make them seem even worse...

OSHA is not allowed to refer a case to Justice without approval from its own lawyers, who are Labor Department solicitors. Murphy was not alone in viewing the solicitors' office as a "black hole" — where cases disappeared because the lawyers were too busy, too eager to settle or too intimidated, particularly if the employer was a powerful corporation.

"The No. 1 problem in OSHA is you have to fight with your own people to prosecute these cases," he said. "Very few were taken up. Sometimes I'd know why. Sometimes I wouldn't."

But after 23 years, Murphy was adept at working the system to get his way. And in this case, the strategy was first to persuade the regional office in Chicago and the national office in Washington that Patrick Walters' death should be treated as a "significant penalty" case. In OSHA-speak, that meant the fines would be at least \$100,000.

If the case was deemed "significant," he reasoned, there would be a better chance of referral to the Justice Department. Even this would take a real fight. But, he added, "It was a rare thing that I went forward with what I believed to be a significant case, and someone in regional or Washington decided not to concur."

After several passages that show the family making its first forays into the bureaucracy, we find out how the road blocks begin to pop up, and the writer explains that investigators must find "willful" violations to prosecute the company and its owner to the fullest extent of the law.

That same month, though, the Walters family lost an important ally. Murphy retired from OSHA on Aug. 2, 2002.

And there was a further complication: Linda Moeves' friendship with Richard T. Gilgrist, then one of three assistant area directors rotating through Murphy's job while a decision was made on a successor.

Gilgrist's boss, the regional administrator in Chicago, Michael G. Connors, said in an interview that Gilgrist had called him after the inquiry was "fairly well completed" to discuss an "unusual situation."

According to Connors, Gilgrist described what had happened and explained that while his office was planning to push for a "significant penalty" designation, it was recommending a willful violation only for the first incident, involving the 15-foot trench, not for Patrick Walters' death.

But he also said that Moeves was a neighbor, and so he was recusing himself from the case. "I believe he absolutely pulled out of the case and did nothing on it after I talked with him," Connors said.

Gilgrist's conflict alone, Connors said, raised something of a red flag. But he also found it "unusual" that the Cincinnati office "would go willful on the nonfatality and then not see willful on the second case."

"I said, send the cases up," he recalled.

Moeves, meanwhile, had hired Robert A. Dimling, the premier OSHA defense lawyer in town, a man well practiced at extricating clients from OSHA's cross hairs.

One example of his savvy came not long after Murphy retired. The lawyer, who would not comment on the case, helped arrange for Murphy and Moeves to meet over lunch, where Murphy offered "to entertain the idea" of helping Moeves Plumbing. Murphy recalled.

For a \$5,000 annual retainer, he could become Moeves's OSHA consultant, training her employees and advising her on future matters, including inspections. Murphy said he made it clear that he could not help on the Walters case. But his reputation, he told her, could ensure that her company was "well respected" at OSHA.

"In my view," he explained, "this was a way to help fix the problems in a comprehensive way."

Moeves agreed to consider the offer, he said, but she ultimately did not accept.

The Walters family began to detect a shift in tone from Shelton. He sounded defensive, Jeff Walters recalled, and suggested that OSHA might not recommend criminal charges. Moeves, the inspector noted, was promising safety improvements.

The family pinned its hopes on Ron Hayes, who took the case directly to the top. In late August, he had lunch with John Henshaw, the OSHA chief, at the Alabama Governor's Safety and Health Conference.

Hayes recalled handing Henshaw a folder with a photograph of Patrick Walters and documents about Moeves Plumbing. Hayes said he explained about Daley's death, and about the OSHA inspection two weeks before Patrick Walters' death, and about how, from what he could tell, it pretty much looked as if a 22-year-old had been sent into a death trap.

"He said, 'Ronnie, this is horrible,'" Hayes recalled.

"And I said, 'Yeah, John, and these are the people you need to prosecute. I'm depending on you to watch this one.'"

Hayes said he told Henshaw that the case was not just about the Walters family. The best way to stop other employers from doing the same thing, he argued, was to bring more prosecutions. Why not start with Moeves Plumbing? ("Asked him to make this happen — this case is bad," Hayes would write in his daily log.)

"I honestly begged," he said. "I couldn't have done anything more than get down on my knees."

Henshaw did not commit himself, Hayes recalled. He suggested the family might have better luck with the local district attorney. Yet he also agreed to look into the matter, Hayes said.

Hayes left feeling optimistic. He viewed the OSHA bureaucracy as the main obstacle. So he had made an end run. "How much higher can you get?" he asked. "I had such high hopes with John."

The Walters family did, too, especially after Henshaw wrote to Jeff Walters on Oct. 9, 2002, offering "my heartfelt condolences" and assuring him that OSHA was still investigating.

"Given our mission of providing safer work places," he wrote, "we feel each worker's death as a personal loss and tragedy."

On Nov. 26, 2002, nearly six months after her husband's death, Crystal Walters received a letter from OSHA notifying her of the results of its investigation. She read it slowly, carefully, searching each paragraph, each line for one word: willful.

OSHA actually issued two sets of violations — one for the trench that killed Patrick Walters, one for the trench inspected two weeks before. In each case, Moeves Plumbing was assessed several serious safety violations for failing to train employees in trench safety and to ensure that trenches were inspected by a "competent person."

Furthermore, OSHA found that Moeves Plumbing committed one willful violation at each trench by failing to provide protection against a collapse. It was exactly the same willful violation that had killed Daley.

"We got the willful," Crystal Walters yelled over the phone to her father-in-law. "Awesome."

In a flurry of calls, word spread through the entire family. The letter, they all thought, was vindication for their months of sleuthing, proof that what happened was not just some act of God. Now it was a matter of pressing OSHA to refer the case to the Justice Department and then pressing the Justice Department to prosecute.

"We had everything that we needed," Jeff Walters said.

The jubilation lasted all of one day.

It died in a four-page agreement signed Nov. 27 by Dimling and the acting area director, Dennis A. Collins. In exchange for Moeves Plumbing's promise not to fight in court, OSHA agreed to one crucial change: The word "willful" was stricken from the violations in Patrick Walters' death.

In its place, OSHA substituted the designation "unclassified" — a term invented more than a decade ago by some of the nation's top corporate defense lawyers.

Their clients resented the stigma — not to mention the legal risks — associated with being labeled a "willful" violator of federal safety laws. So the lawyers dangled a carrot: If OSHA would replace the pejorative "willful" with the nonjudgmental "unclassified," their clients would pay higher fines and make substantial safety improvements.

In recent years, though, OSHA has been less and less zealous about collecting those carrots. In the case of Moeves Plumbing, OSHA agreed to cut its fines 40 percent, from \$90,000 to \$54,000. Moeves Plumbing could pay in four annual installments, with the first not due for another year. It was not required to admit any wrongdoing.

It did, however, agree that employees working in trenches would complete a 30-hour OSHA training course. And it would hire a consultant to perform random trench checks for two years.

On her lawyer's advice, Moeves canceled an interview for this article. But in a brief discussion with a reporter in her offices, she expressed sympathy for the Walters family and defended her company's safety practices. She said she knew that Patrick Walters's relatives had pushed hard for prosecution, and that OSHA had given strong consideration to a criminal referral.

But no employer, she insisted, cares more about the welfare of her workers than she.

Ed Frank, a Labor Department spokesman, said OSHA could not find any records related to its decision not to seek criminal charges against Moeves Plumbing. Among officials involved in the case, only Connors, the Chicago regional chief, was made available for an interview.

Still, from interviews with him and with the retired Murphy, as well as an examination of the available record, a much clearer — and at the same time profoundly befuddling — picture of what happened inside OSHA begins to emerge.

OSHA's final determination seems almost perverse. To begin with, the Chicago office would determine that the violations that killed Patrick Walters were more flagrant than Cincinnati thought — yet would reduce the punishment. Stranger yet, Moeves escaped a criminal referral not because of anything she did right but because of something she did wrong.

And in the end, OSHA would say that it had achieved “a good solution” by obtaining promises of additional vigilance and training — the same promises Bill Murphy extracted after Daley's death in 1989.

When the Cincinnati office's formal recommendation came in, Connors said, it was much as Gilgrist had suggested that summer: it called for willful violations for Charles Shelton's first inspection only, on the ground that work had gone on under the noses of the two supervisors just trained in trench safety. Even so, the area office did recommend a “significant penalty” for both cases — \$101,500 — which would have led to a review by Henshaw.

Connors said that he and his assistants in Chicago disagreed with the Cincinnati office on both counts. First, they thought the violations that killed Patrick Walters were indeed willful.

By law, a willful violation means the employer demonstrated either “intentional disregard” or “plain indifference” toward safety laws. Given the history — indeed, the very recent history — of trenching violations by Moeves Plumbing, Connors said he and his aides saw strong evidence of plain indifference, even if they could not prove that Moeves was personally aware of the trench's unsafe conditions.

Yet having decided that Moeves Plumbing had again killed a worker by willfully violating safety laws, the Chicago office decided that the case did not warrant a significant penalty. It reduced the proposed fine from \$101,500 to \$90,000. It also considered and rejected seeking a Justice Department review for possible prosecution.

What eats at her, Marts said, is that she cannot stop thinking about how her boy died. When she gets into an elevator, she holds her breath as long as she can. She imagines him under all that mud, holding his breath.

She still has not washed his pillow cases or his old clothes, clinging to his fading scent as long as she can. She listens often to his interview with Shelton, to his smoker's cough and his nervous laugh. She visits the cemetery nearly every day, tidying up, rearranging the flowers.

It was a lot of money, but after Patrick died the family agreed that his final resting place would have to be in a mausoleum, not six feet under.

“There's no way I was going to put him in the ground again,” his mother said.

After more passages explaining the strange reasons for lack of prosecution, the story returns to the dead man's mother and her grief and her revenge fantasies such as seeing the company's owner — Linda Moeves — buried up to her neck in mud. But that doesn't really help a mother forget a son who died in seemingly preventable circumstances. And in describing a mother's reactions, the story moves almost full circle to its ending.

PROFILES

A journalistic profile is a mini-biography, a selective view. The secret is what to leave out — and what to put in. Though it will include background information about the person, a profile focuses on the single element that makes that person news- or feature-worthy.

WHEN TO USE IT

The key to a good profile begins with selecting a worthy subject. Worthy subjects break down into two basic categories: newsmakers and “ordinary” people.

A profile of a newsmaker, someone frequently in the news or just in the news of the moment, serves to turn someone who might be familiar mainly as a talking head in a news story into a more fleshed-out individual. A profile of an “ordinary” person, someone who doesn’t turn up on the traditional newsgathering radar screen, is worthy of attention for less obvious reasons: He or she may have an interesting profession or hobby or may be facing a challenge of some sort.

PITFALLS

Becoming too close to the subject — or keeping too far away. Good profile writing involves a close connection with the subject, and to do that a writer must, to a certain extent, let his guard down — and keep it up at the same time. It sounds contradictory, but it can be done. The key is establishing guidelines and ground rules immediately with your subject. Let the subject know you are human, you are sympathetic, but you are also required to verify the facts, to contact enemies as well as friends.

Above all, don’t be maudlin. Often we write profiles about people who have suffered, who have lost, and we are empathetic, as we should be. But that empathy should be expressed through telling details rather than purple prose. In general, the more powerful the emotion, the more restrained your touch should be.

COMPONENTS

A SINGLE CONTROLLING IDEA THAT ANSWERS THE QUESTION: Why is this person worth writing about?

Call it a nut graph if you must. Call it a theme or a thesis if you prefer. But somewhere, either overtly or in a subtle selection of details, the writer has to pose and answer that question, and make all subsequent decisions in writing the profile based on that answer. Otherwise it’s not a profile. It’s a resume. The writer and the editor must find a focus and make a call about why this person is worthy of attention, what this person represents. Is it a universal quality, such as courage? Is it a more specific moral, social or religious issue, such as gay marriage? Is it a connection to a news event?

It can, of course, be all three of these things.

SCENES

Good profiles capture moments in the life of the subject, either directly observed by the writer or reconstructed through interviews, that dramatize the subjects’ activities and personality scenes — that show, rather than tell, who this person really is. A vignette lead is a staple of the quick profile. In-depth profiles may include a number of fleshed-out scenes that give the readers what amounts to a ringside seat, giving them a three-dimensional experience rather than simple, dry information.

OBSERVATIONS BY FRIENDS AND ACQUAINTANCES

Stories and observations that bring in different points of view about the subject of the profile.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Include a selective amount of biographical information, and more general information about the subject area that makes this person profile-worthy, based on the main idea that the writer and the editor has agreed upon as the main idea of the profile.

AN ENGAGING LEDE

Ideally, a lede into a profile will quickly establish a hint of the personality of the subject and the reason for the profile.

Dialogue: Part of scene-building is observing the character interacting with others, capturing dialogue among the characters. This technique is stronger than accumulating quotes because, again, we are back to the fundamentals of good writing: better to show than to tell.

CRISP TRANSITIONS

Because scenes are so frequently used in good profiles, strong transitions are often needed to take the reader smoothly from that scene into an explanation about why those scenes are significant; what they represent. Sometimes a scene will speak for itself. Sometimes the writer needs to step in and explain it. The key is knowing when to step in and explain — and when to have confidence in the reader, and in your own writing, and let the scene speak for itself.

A RESONANT ENDING

Strong profiles will end with a quote or an observation that reinforces the main idea of the profile.

Examples of great storytelling strategies as applied to the profile:

ESTABLISH KEY IDEAS

Here, in a Jeff Kunerth profile of a man who is paid to dance with elderly partners at an Orlando senior center, the idea that the occupation is both romantic and sad is presented. The reader is left to judge whether it is one or the other — or both.

He's the most dapper man in the ballroom, dressed in a dark suit and tie, his white hair combed straight back, his eyes the color of cigar ash.

Joe Blum extends his hand to a slight woman with trembling hands and a folding, three-wheeled walker leaning against the wall. Carol Chinn is an 87-year-old widow with Parkinson's disease.

When she tries to walk, Chinn is feeble. But on the dance floor, in the arms of Joe Blum, she is graceful again.

He sings to her as they circle slowly around the ballroom floor of the Marks Street Senior Center. It is a heavenly feeling for Chinn, more like floating than dancing.

When the song ends, Blum returns her to the round table by the window and extends his hand to 85-year-old Elizabeth Hall, a statuesque woman in a long gown.

Sitting by herself, Joan Barnett watches with envy as Blum alternates between Chinn and Hall, Hall and Chinn.

She would be dancing with Joe Blum, too, but he costs too much.

"I can't afford it. I'm a retired schoolteacher," says Barnett, who is in her late 60s.

Joe Blum is one of several dance escorts in Orlando who charge as much as \$65 an hour to take elderly women ballroom dancing.

The escorts are often dance teachers. Their clientele are the older students whose husbands have passed away, or elderly single women whose pool of potential dance partners grows smaller with time.

DON'T GO MAUDLIN

This profile by *Chicago Tribune* writer Kevin Pang is about a magician who visits a children's hospital as a volunteer, showing them tricks to keep their spirits up. Given the subject, it is obviously a story that could easily have become maudlin. It doesn't. Note how, from the very beginning, Pang uses simple language and a key detail to keep the tone restrained. He begins his story with objective proof that the magician's visits make a difference.

A wire snakes from the EKG monitor, swoops past the rolling cart with the chocolate milk and orange wedges, up the bed, past the pink teddy bear and around Sarah's thumb.

Inside Room 504 at Rush Children's Hospital, the EKG monitor blips. Sarah's heart is beating normally, 88 times a minute.

"Hi, I'm Mike, the hospital magician. Would you like to see some close-up magic?"

Sure, Sarah says. She's 11, with sandy-blond hair and wire-rimmed glasses.

The heart monitor pulses — 88, 88, 89.

Mike Walton hands her the four of hearts and asks her to hold the playing card between her palms. Walton is holding the jack of spades. Slowly, he waves his card in tiny circles — 87.

Sarah turns over her card: the jack of spades. Walton is now holding her four of hearts.

"What the ...," Sarah says. "Holy cow!"

The heart monitor jumps — 98. Instantaneously. Like magic.

Examples of great storytelling strategies as applied to the profile:

ENGAGING LEDES

It's good to begin with a simple detail that captures the essence of the character being profiled. In this Nancy Imperiale profile about an old man caring for his wife, simple language and specific details are used to give us an early hint about the strength of the man's devotion.

Her socks are blue.

He likes to match her socks with her slacks, blouse, even earrings. The way she would dress herself if she were going to church.

"I get her pretty," he says.

Today her outfit is green. But blue socks were all he could find.

"I feel bad," he says.

Still, dressing up Alma Peay may be the finest hour for her husband, Roosevelt. All the other hours are filled with so much work.

He gets her to sleep, comforts her through the night and wakes her in the morning. He bathes and dresses her, fixes her hair and gets her settled in her chair. He spends hours washing soiled sheets and clothing. He shops, cooks for and feeds her. He gives her medicine, takes her to the bathroom, checks her blood pressure, calms her down when she's upset, and installed alarms on the back and front doors so he will know if she tries to wander off.

He's her sole caregiver. She's his whole life.

Alma is in the late stages of Alzheimer's, a disease that robs you of memory, judgment, personality, speech and eventually life. She was diagnosed more than 10 years ago, and it was five years ago that she became uncommunicative and unable to recognize friends and family.

A STRONG SCENE

Here, in a profile of a social worker, Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Anne Hull uses a tense situation, which she observed, to introduce the subject and the theme of a profile.

Note that she leaves us hanging at the end of the introduction: We do not know, we are not told, what the decision will be.

Note, also, that she takes us inside her character's head — we know what the subject is thinking.

Something else: Hull mentions the clipboard that her subject holds in this section. The clipboard is a symbol and an element of continuity. It will be mentioned again and again throughout the article as a reminder of the power that the subject holds in the midst of the chaos she encounters.

Upstairs at a Clearwater apartment house, a woman suffers like a wasted prizefighter. Her mouth is torn at the corner and her left eye is swollen shut. She took the losing end of something, and now nine people are crouched around in her living room, waiting for answers.

"I told you, he didn't hit me," she whispers from the couch. She lifts her bloody face, looking past the police officers and paramedics, and fixes her gaze on the petite woman with the clipboard. The one with the greatest power.

"I don't want you to take my kids, Kimberly."

Kim Edelson, Department of Children and Families, withdraws from the living room. She looks around. This is where Mary was supposed to get her life together, in this government apartment with a balcony view of muffler shops and cut-rate motels. Edelson walks into the neat kitchen. An "I love you, mom" magnet gleams on a white refrigerator.

In the boys' bedroom, their paintings from day care hang above the pillow they share.

But the pink tiles in the bathroom are splattered with blood. A metal towel bar is lying in the sink. Edelson hears a man screaming from the porch outside.

"I didn't do nothin' to her," he shouts, as he is handcuffed and led to a police car. "I'll get your ass, you mother f--- Kimberly."

What to do, what to do, Edelson thinks. In a narrow hallway, she turns to a caseworker. "I don't know 100 percent for sure she's getting her butt kicked."

The caseworker senses Edelson wavering. "If you don't remove these kids, Kim, they're in danger."

Every week, one case rises above the churning sea of others — the custody squabbles, the nests of roaches in cribs and the ungovernable teenagers. There is always one case that sucks the life out of you. Well, here it is, Edelson thinks. And now the whole room is waiting for a decision.

REVIEWS

A review is a report that describes, analyzes and evaluates a “work” — a play, a book, a car, a film, a restaurant, a pair of shoes, an art exhibit, a building, a concert, etc. — from the perspective of an individual reviewer (or critic). Although a review typically contains objectively verifiable information, its essence is subjective.

WHEN TO USE IT

A review is typically published at the time a work is presented to the public. On one level, the review is meant to advise the reader. But since no reviewer could possibly share the tastes of all readers, this is a trickier proposition than some assume. It may be more useful to think of the reviewer as the person who begins the conversation about the work under discussion.

COMPONENTS

A. THE FACTS. Like other journalists, the reviewer has an obligation to report basic facts. These usually include such facts as the title of the work, the name(s) of its creator(s) and its category (Chinese restaurant, mystery novel, etc.).

B. THE STORY WITHIN THE WORK. For narrative forms — including most plays, films, novels, operas and certain kinds of music — the reviewer should provide a synopsis of at least part of the story within the work. And even for non-narrative forms — including restaurants and architecture as well as much dance, painting, photography and other kinds of music — the reviewer should attempt to explain, in one way or another, what “statement” the work is attempting to make.

C. THE STORY OF THE ENCOUNTER. Every review, whatever else it does, ought to tell the story of the encounter between the work and the reviewer. Telling this story can be the most exciting part of the review, especially if the reader is provided with a good understanding of the work in question and has a basic grasp of the reviewer’s tastes and inclinations. So, for example, if a reviewer who generally does not like country music writes a positive review of a country-music concert, there is probably a pretty good story to be told there.

D. FIRST PERSON. For the story of the encounter between the reviewer and the work to be effective, the reader must remember that the review is the reaction of a particular individual. The simplest, most direct way for the reviewer to make this clear is for the reviewer to write in the first person. Certainly, there are other ways to proceed, but none is as easily understood by a wide range of readers. A reviewer should never be required to use the first person, but the first person should always be an option — especially in a publication, such as a general-interest newspaper, that is not intended solely for specialists or sophisticates.

E. OTHER STORIES. Within the context of a review, it is possible, and often recommended, to tell other stories, including those related to the life of the artist (or artists), the history of the work, the situation in which the work is presented, the reaction of the audience and even, in some cases, the life of the reviewer. Nothing that provides an occasion for storytelling should be dismissed out of hand.

PITFALLS

Reviewers can slip up when they forget that reviewing is more like an art than a science. There is no formula for a review. A reviewer must feel his or her way along. For editors of reviews, the biggest pitfall is not trusting the reviewer’s intuitions. The consensus among the reviewers questioned is that a rigid approach to editing is death to reviewing and an especially painful death to the storytelling impulse.

F. VOICE. Feature writers often speak of finding the right “voice” for a particular story. A jaunty, light-hearted voice might be appropriate for a feature about the public’s reaction to the first day of spring. A somber voice might be well-suited to the story of a double homicide. Although a reviewer must also be mindful of such considerations, the reviewer has something else to remember. The reviewer’s voice — that is, his or her style and tone — should have a certain consistency from review to review. The reviewer is a sort of character in the reviews and should, therefore, remain true to character.

G. FORMAT. The usual review format, which has no standard structure and a minimum of rules, usually works well as a storytelling device. Brevity is a virtue so long as meaning and depth are not sacrificed. To say that an art show is the best of its kind this year without also saying, in some detail, just what kind of art show that is, ill serves the show and the reader. Leaving out that information would be omitting an indispensable part of the story.

H. ALTERNATE FORMATS. When it comes to reviewing, the consensus goes, one size does not fit all. On the other hand, many reviewers feel that offbeat formats often work well as storytelling devices for particular reviews when they arise naturally out of the subject of the review. A film-themed restaurant, The Hollywood Brown Derby at Walt Disney World, was reviewed in the form of a movie script. A CD by Paul Shaffer, David Letterman’s bandleader, was reviewed as one of Letterman’s famous Top 10 lists.

I. INFORMALITY. An arch formality was once the norm for reviews. To educated readers, it sent the message that the reviewer, too, was a person of culture. And it could have the often-intended effect of intimidating the unsophisticated reader. (“Golly, he writes so good he must know what he’s talkin’ about!”) Today, with our emphasis on diversity and inclusiveness, such transparent elitism comes off as antique and inappropriate. As a storytelling goal, reviewers should try, in general, to write the way people speak — readers and reviewers alike.

J. HUMOR. While humor is a great a tool, it must always be used in service to the story and to the point being made in the review. A stray joke or pun, while perhaps amusing in itself, tends to make the reader impatient. (And, of course, there have been great critics who’ve told stories very well without much humor.)

EXAMPLES: The letters in brackets refer to the storytelling components above.

TV review: “Monk”

by Nancy Franklin in “The New Yorker”

I. INFORMALITY

The USA Network, let’s face it, isn’t anyone’s go-to channel, but, still, I find it strange that not a single person has mentioned its show *Monk* to me in the year since it began.

The series, which stars Tony Shalhoub, became so popular so quickly — it is to USA what *The Shield* has been to FX — that by last fall it qualified as one of the biggest basic-cable hits ever.

J. HUMOR

You could attribute the Benedictine silence surrounding the first season of *Monk* to people’s not wanting to admit that they’re home on Friday nights at ten o’clock, if it weren’t for the fact that each episode also aired a second time on weeknights on ABC.

D. FIRST PERSON

I myself was off duty during the entire first season — out of town, away from the media maelstrom, and limiting my viewing to miners, snipers, and the Des Moines weather report — so I only just caught up with some of last year’s episodes, as the show was beginning its second season in mid-June.

I didn’t expect much; in fact, I’ve been wary of Shalhoub for the last four years, ever since I saw the awful sitcom *Stark Raving Mad*, in which he played an unmanageable, “zany” writer. His character was nerve-racking and distracting, like a child in the car in front of you making faces while you’re trying to read the road signs, and the performance, unfairly, dislodged Shalhoub’s better work from my cranial grooves. That excitable, manic quality — I wanted to bottle it and not sell it.

But *Monk* is so wonderful, so winning — it pretty much had me by the second minute of the pilot — that it calls to mind the famous line that Audrey Hepburn says to Cary Grant in *Charade*: “Do you know what’s wrong with you? Nothing.” *Monk*’s charm isn’t the debonair, sweep-you-off-your-feet kind; the show is, after all, about a detective, Adrian Monk, who suffers from obsessive-compulsive disorder, which isn’t exactly the stuff that swoons are made of. Its comedy and its drama are more genuine and more piercing than that. It’s the real thing.

At the beginning of the pilot, a bunch of police officers are standing around in an apartment where a murder has taken place, watching Monk. After a long, grim silence, he says, portentously, “The stove.” “Over here,” says one of the officers. “No,” Monk says. “I mean my stove. I think I left it on.” A woman in the group offers to go to his apartment and check. “No, no,” he says, and then, his nature getting the better of him, he adds, “Would you?”

The back-and-forth goes on for a while, but at the same time that Monk is fretting about his stove, he’s noticing details at the crime scene that have escaped everyone else’s attention. This is both the secret of his success and his bete noire: the fact that he notices things that others don’t and the fact that he can’t stop noticing them.

When Monk’s wife was murdered, four years earlier, his already obsessive tendencies mushroomed into a full-blown anxiety disorder. In addition to his compulsions (he wears identical outfits every day, with his shirt buttoned all the way up; he interrupts his therapy session to straighten a pillow on a couch across the room), he’s phobic when it comes to heights, crowds, germs and, of all things, milk.

A year after his wife died, Monk’s police badge was taken away by his boss on the San Francisco police force, and Monk’s goal since then has been to win reinstatement. He works as a private consultant and is sometimes called in by the mayor to help out his former colleagues with difficult high-profile cases.

He is assisted on those cases, and in the trials of daily life, by Sharona Fleming (Bitty Schram), a practical nurse in every sense; she has a no-nonsense approach to getting on with things, because she must — she’s a single working mother. Fleming understands Monk better than anyone else does, and they have a great partnership, but she doesn’t shield him from her occasional exasperation — she doesn’t treat him like a freak.

At one point, when she quits (temporarily), Monk says lamely, “I’ll never forget you,” thinking that those words will get her back, and she responds, “You never forget anything.” Schram’s snappy liveliness makes Fleming more than a satellite of *Monk*; she is a character in her own right.

E. OTHER STORIES & J. HUMOR

B. STORY WITHIN THE WORK

C. THE ENCOUNTER

EXAMPLES: *The letters in brackets refer to the storytelling components above.*

TV review: “Monk”

by Nancy Franklin in “The New Yorker”

Monk’s neuroses are a source of comedy, but they’re not played for laughs, exactly; though his limitations often trip him up, he’s no bumbling Inspector Clouseau.

A. THE FACTS

The show, which was created by David Hoberman and Andy Breckman, links Monk’s brilliance to his obsessive qualities without oversimplifying the connection. It’s not his obsessiveness that makes him brilliant, and it’s not his brilliance that makes him obsessive; yet the two can’t really be separated. And Shalhoub himself is brilliant at conveying the tension between Monk’s desire to conquer his disorder and his dug-in defense of his behavior.

He’s aware that most people don’t go around counting the bricks in a wall or touching every parking meter they walk by, but, for him, not to do so would be to put himself in dire peril. These aren’t things that give him pleasure; they’re just what he has to do to stay alive.

I think the reason that people don’t talk more about *Monk*, despite its popularity, is that watching it is an intensely personal, even interactive, experience. Adrian Monk is a kind of private investigator of our own flaws and sadnesses, and no doubt many viewers identify with the myriad intrapsychic obstacles that make it hard for him to get through the day. They don’t need to talk to their friends about *Monk*, because simply watching the show serves the same function — as sharp as its dialogue is, Monk is often touching beyond words.

It may be peculiar to feel that you’ve been understood by a TV show, but in the same way that Fleming gets Monk — once, when he finds out that he’s been turned down for reinstatement, he says before walking away, “I just want to be alone,” and Fleming says, “I’ll come with you,” which is exactly what he wants her to do — you feel that Monk gets you.

C. STORY OF THE ENCOUNTER

EXAMPLES: The letters in brackets refer to the storytelling components above.

Film review: “Shoeshine”

by Pauline Kael in “The New Yorker”

C. STORY OF THE ENCOUNTER

When *Shoeshine* opened in 1947, I went to see it alone after one of those terrible lovers’ quarrels that leave one in a state of incomprehensible despair. I came out of the theater, tears streaming, and overheard the petulant voice of a college girl complaining to her boyfriend, “Well, I don’t see what was so special about that movie.”

D. FIRST PERSON

I walked up the street, crying blindly, no longer certain whether my tears were for the tragedy on the screen, the hopelessness I felt for myself, or the alienation I felt from those who could not experience the radiance of *Shoeshine*. For if people cannot feel *Shoeshine*, what can they feel?

My identification with those two lost boys had become so strong that I did not feel simply a mixture of pity and disgust toward this dissatisfied customer but an intensified hopelessness about everything ... Later I learned that the man with whom I had quarreled had gone the same night and had also emerged in tears. Yet our tears for each other, and for *Shoeshine*, did not bring us together.

Life, as *Shoeshine* demonstrates, is too complex for facile endings.

Shoeshine was not conceived in the patterns of romance or melodrama; it is one of those rare works of art that seem to emerge from the welter of human experience without smoothing away the raw edges, or losing what most movies lose — the sense of confusion and accident in human affairs.

James Agee’s immediate response to the film was, “*Shoeshine* is about as beautiful, moving and heartening a film as you are ever likely to see.” A few months later he retracted his evaluation of it as a work of art and wrote that it was not a completed work of art but “the raw or, at best, the roughed-out materials of art.”

I think he should have trusted his initial response: the greatness of *Shoeshine* is in that feeling we get of human emotions that have not been worked-over and worked-into something (a pattern? a structure?) and cannot really be comprised in such a structure. We receive something more naked, something that pours out of the screen.

Orson Welles paid tribute to this quality of the film when he said in 1960, “In handling a camera I feel that I have no peer. But what De Sica can do, that I can’t do. I ran his *Shoeshine* again recently and the camera disappeared, the screen disappeared; it was just life ...”

When *Shoeshine* came to this country, *Life* Magazine wrote, “New Italian film will shock the world ... will act on U.S. audiences like a punch in the stomach.” But few Americans felt that punch in the stomach. Perhaps, like the college girl, they need to be hit by an actual fist before they can feel. Or, perhaps, to take a more charitable view of humanity, they feared the pain of the film.

Just about everybody has heard of *Shoeshine* — it is one of the greatest and most famous films of all time — but how many people have actually seen it? They didn’t even go to see it in Italy. As its director Vittorio De Sica has said, “*Shoeshine* was a disaster for the producer. It cost less than a million lire, but in Italy few people saw it as it was released at a time when the first American films were reappearing ...” Perhaps in the U.S. people stayed away because it was advertised as a social protest picture — which is a little like advertising *Hamlet* as a political study about a struggle for power.

E. TELLING OTHER STORIES

Shoeshine has a sweetness and a simplicity that suggest greatness of feeling, and this is so rare in film works that, to cite a comparison, one searches beyond the medium — if Mozart had written an opera set in poverty, it might have had this kind of painful beauty.

A. STATING THE FACTS

Shoeshine, written by Cesare Zavattini is a social protest film that rises above its purpose. It is a lyric study of how two boys betrayed by society betray each other and themselves. The two young shoeshine boys who sustain their friendship and dreams amid the apathy of postwar Rome are destroyed by their own weaknesses and desires when sent to prison for black-marketeering.

This tragic study of the corruption of innocence is intense, compassionate and, above all, humane.

EXAMPLES: The letters in brackets refer to the storytelling components above.

“Paul Shaffer & The Party Boys of Rock ’n Roll”

by the Orlando Sentinel

H. ALTERNATE FORMATS

Make that the world’s most fortunate bandleader, too.

That’s because, despite Shaffer’s formidable talents as archivist and custodian of rock’s royal heritage, he wouldn’t be the balding little dot on the musical map that he is today without his longtime supporting role on David Letterman’s shows.

Take away the Letterman gig and the concept of Shaffer releasing his second album (the follow to 1989’s *Coast to Coast*) would be nothing more than a nutty, crazy, cuckoo kind of idea. Fodder for a Letterman dream sequence, perhaps.

So, in keeping with the spirit of Dave’s show, here are the TOP 10 OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE NEW PAUL SHAFFER ALBUM, direct from the home office in Orlando:

(Drum roll, please, Anton.)

10. *The World’s Most Dangerous Party* presents Shaffer and his bandmates (guitarist Sid McGinnis, drummer Anton Fig, bassist Will Lee) in a looser, friendlier setting than on the stiff, overproduced *Coast to Coast*. Although they recorded it in a studio, Shaffer and producer Todd Rundgren include noisy, party-style patter between songs, featuring such guests as Ringo Starr, James Coburn, Phil Spector and Eartha Kitt. A two-disc set, the album is full of hip cover tunes as well as one funky original.

9. While the party idea succeeds in putting the band into an intimate club atmosphere, it also means you have to endure a lot of Shaffer’s hipster posturing: “Phoeb-ala Snow, listen, we’re just about to get into an urban-contemporary kind of groove. You want to hang around and grab on to some of it?”

8. Shaffer has a lot of comedian friends (Dana Carvey, Mike Myers, Jon Lovitz, Martin Short, among others), none of whom are at their funniest in the cameos included here. (A running gag about Lovitz owing Shaffer money is comedically bankrupt.)

7. Bill Murray still manages to wring a laugh out of a short revisit to his smarmy nightclub-singer character in a reference to the 1970s hit “Wildfire” — “There’s somebody in the other room that really wants to hear that song about the horse. You know, where the horse busted loose?”

6. Top honors in the Adm. Stockdale “Why Am I Here?” category are shared by a dour Lou Reed and Letterman himself. Dave is a pretty good actor, but it’s hard to tell if his befuddlement is real or part of the act when Shaffer construes his participation as a sign of support: “I had no idea this was going to be happening,” Dave says, “but I’m here, sure.”

5. Joan Jett justifies her presence with a scorching cover of the Goffin-King chestnut “Don’t Bring Me Down.” Also, sax man (and frequent Shaffer sideman) David Sanborn and Aaron Neville contribute to a lovely version of Bonnie Raitt’s “I Can’t Make You Love Me.”

4. Another high point: Blues Traveler harmonica man John Popper’s contributions on “I Was Made to Love Her” and “Middle of the Road.”

3. Despite the material and the guest list, Shaffer’s party soundtrack is erratic — ranging from inspired choices (especially a medley of Booker T. and the MGs’ “Time Is Tight,” “Hip Hugger” and “Green Onions”) to stuff that could qualify as the world’s coolest elevator music (do we really need another cover of Led Zeppelin’s “Black Dog”?).

2. Tony Bennett singing James Brown’s “Doing It to Death”? Excuse me, I think this is my floor.

And the final observation about *The World’s Most Dangerous Party* . . .

1. A recording of actual Letterman Top 10 Lists would give this album a serious run for its money.

