

Feature Writing

Region Meet • 2023



You are a reporter for the **Leaguetown Press**, the student newspaper of Leaguetown High School.

From the given information, write a **feature story** as you would for the high school newspaper. You may use statements attributed to individuals as **direct or indirect quotes**. You may not change the meaning of a statement. You have **one hour**.

Do not write your name or the name of your school on this sheet or your entry. **Put your number on your paper.**

Leaguetown High School has 3,294 students in grades 9-12. Over spring break, the school's Camping Club took a camping trip to Lost Maples State Natural Area. Along with club sponsor Susan Ellis, 10 students attended the trip, where the group reserved two campsites along the Sabinal River. The campsites were located about an hour's hike off the main trail, so the group had to pack all their belongings and supplies in their backpacks and hike to the site. The group had carefully chosen the location, studied the area and practiced using their equipment ahead of the trip. Some members camped in a tent and some slept in sleeping bags in the open air.

On the second night, senior and Camping Club president Jared Douglas laid out his backpack and sleeping bag at the base of a bald cypress tree 20 yards from the camp and fell asleep around midnight. At 1:30 a.m., a bolt of lightning struck the tree, sending electricity through Douglas' body before hitting the ground. The force of the lightning strike knocked him into the air. When he landed a few feet away, he was unconscious, had significant burns and his clothes had been shredded.

The booming sound woke up the other campers. The group had agreed to leave their cell phones at home, but Ellis brought hers in case of an emergency. She handed her phone to a student to call 911 while she and two other students administered first aid to Douglas until rescuers arrived. Within 20 minutes, he was awake and talking, but he still couldn't move. By 2:30 a.m., he was being airlifted to Leaguetown Regional Hospital. When his parents arrived at the hospital at 5 a.m., he could move his arms and legs again.

On April 24, Douglas will return to school for the first time since being electrocuted by lightning. You are writing for the issue of the Press to be distributed Friday, April 21.

■ JARED DOUGLAS, senior

"I don't remember much about what happened. I set my sleeping bag underneath a tree. I hadn't gotten much sleep the night before, so I wanted to set up further away from the rest of the campers. I brought a pillow, which I leaned against the tree. I got in my sleeping bag and zipped it up. I rested my head on the pillow and fell asleep. The next thing I remember is being in the hospital and not being able to move my arms and legs.

"That was probably the scariest part of this whole thing. I remember taking a deep breath and trying to move my fingers and toes. I couldn't, so I panicked. Nurses and doctors kept talking to me to keep me calm, and they were right. After a couple hours, I started to have feeling again and was able to move around. They said the electricity traveled through the tree and down my spine before hitting the ground. It shocked my central nervous system. After I recovered from that shock, I had to worry about my second-degree burns

■ JARED DOUGLAS, continued

and broken eardrums from the boom. Blisters covered my back, and I had to lay on my stomach for almost two weeks while they healed.

“I was having the best time on that trip — hiking, fishing, sitting around the fire with my friends. The smell of charred hot dogs and fresh air. I still love the outdoors. And I love sleeping under the stars. Even getting struck by lightning can’t change that.

“I’m grateful to Mrs. Ellis and my friends from the club for acting quickly and getting me to a hospital. Mrs. Ellis is my favorite teacher — in my least favorite subject — pre-calculus. But I’m glad I asked her to sponsor the Camping Club. If it weren’t for her, I might not be here.”

■ SUSAN ELLIS, Camping Club sponsor

“I’ve been camping my whole life, but this was by far the most stressful thing that’s ever happened in the woods. Sometimes I can still hear the sound of that boom that woke me up. I can still smell the burning wood and smoke. I can still see Jared’s burns and shredded clothes. I thought he was dead.

“After the helicopter took off with him, the rest of the students and I scrambled to pack everything up and get out of there. We couldn’t continue the trip. We had to hike back to the cars for several miles in the pitch black. Luckily, we had a few lanterns to light the way. I think the campers could tell I was rattled, so they sang songs and tried to perk things up as much as they could. When I finally made it to my car to go home, I sat there and sobbed for a good 10 minutes. I wasn’t sure he would survive. I was so happy to get that phone call from his parents the next day telling me he would be OK and I could visit him.”

■ MARIA DOUGLAS, Jared’s mother

“When I heard my phone ring in the middle of the night, I knew it was bad news from the camping trip. But I never would have dreamed of this. When we made it to the hospital and I finally got to see him, it didn’t look good. He was lying on his stomach, and it looked like the skin on his back was ready to peel off. I said his name, and he looked up and smiled at me. That smile told me that he would eventually get better.

“For the next couple of weeks, he stayed at home to heal. He was able to do some school work from bed, but mostly we just wanted him to rest and recover. Now, he’s ready to be back. He misses his friends. He misses camping. I think he might even miss pre-cal.”

■ TIA GRINER, junior

“When we heard that boom, we weren’t sure what it was at first. I didn’t even think of lightning. I thought maybe it was a bomb going off somewhere. It wasn’t even raining. One kid saw the flash hit the tree right above Jared, so we figured it out and everyone rushed over to check on him. That was the scariest night of my life.

“I joined Camping Club because my friends were joining and because I thought it would be fun to spend the night away from home a few nights a year. Watching Mrs. Ellis stay calm in that situation was amazing. We went through the first aid process with her in real time. We learned so much more than your typical survival skills.”

■ ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The indirect lightning strike that affected Douglas is called a “side flash.” There was no rain in the forecast on the night of the incident.

DO NOT DISTRIBUTE TO STUDENTS BEFORE OR DURING THE CONTEST!

Region • 2023 Feature Writing Contest Tips and Sample Story

Contest Director: Give one copy to each judge to use during critiquing/judging. Also, staple one copy of the contest and one copy of the contest tips to each student's returned entry. The purpose of the tips is to provide immediate feedback to students. However, it is not meant to replace written comments from the judge.

1. Figure out what the story is about and its theme or focus. This story is about a student who was indirectly hit by lightning on a school camping trip.

2. The lead of a feature story must grab the reader's attention. It does not have to be a certain length or include the 5Ws and H. It should set a scene and get the reader into the story. Although you have freedom to describe the scene as you think it might have existed, try to stay as close to the prompt as you can. Some judges will not want you to wander off the subject too much.

After setting up his sleeping bag against a tree, senior Jared Douglas fell asleep just a few feet away from his fellow Camping Club members. The next thing he remembers is waking up surrounded by doctors and nurses.

3. Once you get past the lead, make sure you include a nut graph. It tells the reader what the story is going to be about. Follow the nut graph with a direct quote and then go into the transition/quote formula.

nut graph

Over spring break, the club took a camping trip to Lost Maples State Natural Area with their sponsor Susan Ellis. On their second night camping, at 1:30 a.m., lightning struck the tree Douglas was sleeping against and caused a side flash that made a loud boom, waking all the campers, electrocuting Douglas and sending him several feet into the air.

After several weeks of recovery, he will return to school on April 24.

direct quote

"Sometimes I can still hear the sound of that boom that woke me up," Ellis said. "I can still smell the burning wood and smoke. I can still see Jared's burns and shredded clothes. I thought he was dead."

4. After the nut graph, the rest of the story can tell itself through the use of transition/quote formula. Be sure you attribute after the quote or at least after the first sentence. An attribution should be: subject of attribution followed by the verb of attribution ("Douglas said," not "said Douglas"). Avoid stacking quotes. Avoid putting two or more quotes together without placing some kind of transition between them. Also, make sure transitions provide information to help the action of the story and that the quote does not repeat information in the transition.

transition/story-telling

Ellis and the rest of the campers burst into action to help him, calling 911 and administering first aid. Within an hour, he was airlifted to Leaguetown Regional Hospital.

direct quote

“I remember taking a deep breath and trying to move my fingers and toes,” Douglas said. “I couldn’t, so I panicked. Nurses and doctors just kept talking to me to keep me calm, and they were right. After a couple hours, I started to have feeling again and was able to move around.”

transition/story-telling

By the time his parents arrived at the hospital at 5 a.m., Jared had regained the ability to move his limbs. However, his recovery was far from over as he still had blistering second-degree burns and broken eardrums from the sound of the lightning strike.

direct quote

“When I heard my phone ring in the middle of the night, I knew it was bad news from the camping trip,” Jared’s mother, Maria Douglas, said. “When we made it to the hospital and I finally got to see him, it didn’t look good. I said his name and he looked up and smiled at me. That smile told me that he would eventually get better.”

5. Always use third person. Don’t say “our student” or “our school board.” Also, do not editorialize. For instance, you should not say “We are proud.” These statements are personal opinions and should not be made in a feature story.

6. Always use the verb “said” as the verb of attribution. Don’t say “says,” “stated,” “feels” or any other synonym for “said.”

7. Finally, look for a strong quote to use as a closing statement or a statement that will bring the reader back to the beginning of the story. It should give the reader a sense of satisfaction or resolution.

Now that Douglas is ready to be back at school, he said he is also eager to return to camping.

“I was having the best time on that trip — hiking, fishing, sitting around the fire with my friends,” he said. “The smell of charred hot dogs and fresh air. I still love the outdoors. And I love sleeping under the stars. Even getting struck by lightning can’t change that.”

SAMPLE STORY

After setting up his sleeping bag against a tree, senior Jared Douglas fell asleep just a few feet away from his fellow Camping Club members. The next thing he remembers is waking up surrounded by doctors and nurses.

“I don’t remember much about what happened,” Douglas said. “I set my sleeping bag underneath a tree. I brought a pillow, which I leaned against the tree. I got in my sleeping bag and zipped it up. I rested my head on the pillow and fell asleep. The next thing I remember is being in the hospital and not being able to move my arms and legs.”

Over spring break, the club took a camping trip to Lost Maples State Natural Area with their sponsor Susan Ellis. On their second night camping, at 1:30 a.m., lightning struck the tree Douglas was sleeping against and caused a side flash that made a loud boom, waking all the campers, electrocuting Douglas and sending him several feet into the air.

After several weeks of recovery, he will return to school on April 24.

Ellis said this was the most stressful moment in all her years of camping.

“Sometimes I can still hear the sound of that boom that woke us up,” Ellis said. “I can still smell the burning wood and smoke. I can still see Jared’s burns and shredded clothes. I thought he was dead.”

Ellis and the rest of the campers burst into action to help him, calling 911 and administering first aid. Within an hour, he was airlifted to Leaguetown Regional Hospital.

“I remember taking a deep breath and trying to move my fingers and toes,” Douglas said. “I couldn’t, so I panicked. Nurses and doctors just kept talking to me to keep me calm, and they were right. After a couple hours, I started to have feeling again and was able to move around.”

By the time his parents arrived at the hospital at 5 a.m., Jared had regained the ability to move his limbs. However, his recovery was far from over as he still had blistering second-degree burns and broken eardrums from the sound of the lightning strike.

“When I heard my phone ring in the middle of the night, I knew it was bad news from the camping trip,” Jared’s mother, Maria Douglas, said. “When we made it to the hospital and I finally got to see him, it didn’t look good. I said his name and he looked up and smiled at me. That smile told me that he would eventually get better.”

For the past few weeks, Douglas has been recovering at home, doing some school work from bed, but according to his mom, he’s anxious to return to his routine.

“Now, he’s ready to be back,” she said. “He misses his friends. He misses camping. I think he might even miss pre-cal.”

After Douglas was airlifted to the hospital, Ellis and the remaining students had to hike back to their cars in the dark. Lanterns and a few songs from the students were the only things that brightened the night.

“I think the campers could tell I was rattled, so they sang songs and tried to perk things up as much as they could,” Ellis said. “When I finally made it to my car to go home, I sat there and sobbed for a good 10 minutes. I wasn’t sure he would survive. I was so happy to get that phone call from his parents the next day, telling me he would be OK and that I could visit him.”

Now that Douglas is ready to be back at school, he said he is also eager to return to camping.

“I was having the best time on that trip – hiking, fishing, sitting around the fire with my friends,” he said. “The smell of charred hot dogs and fresh air. I still love the outdoors. And I love sleeping under the stars. Even getting struck by lightning can’t change that.”