

Story Ideas

Foundations of Journalism - JR 102
Emerson College - Spring 2013

Story Ideas

Story Ideas

- Sometimes editors will assign specific stories.
 - Often editors will send you to cover an event, but it's up to you to use news judgment to find determined what part of the event warrants a story.
- Other times, it is up to the journalist to conceive story ideas.
 - The more stories you can come up with, the more valuable you will be.

Story Ideas

- Up to the reporter to be able to spot news.
 - Notice patterns.
 - Understand when a story might become a big story.
 - Have an idea of what might/could happen.
- This is especially true for your beat.
 - Beat writers must be EXPERTS on their beats.

Beats

- Beat reporters are responsible for generating story ideas on their beat.
- This includes...
 - What events to cover
 - What might warrant a feature or in-depth reporting
 - Spotting trends/patterns
 - Knowing when news might break
 - Knowing news before it breaks

*We will get into beats further in Week 9

Sources for Story Ideas

- Press Releases
- Sources
- Records
- Tips
- Localizing
- Regionalizing
- Follow Up
- Events

Press Releases

- A letter or email sent to a large number of media outlets with information about an event or possible story.
- Comes from a PR person/agency or from a press office.
- May highlight an event that will be happening or recap one that just happened.

Press Releases

- Never just rewrite a press release alone as a news story.
 - You need to do some reporting.
- Never copy and paste **ANYTHING** from a press release.
 - If you're taking some information from a press release, make sure you are rewriting it in your own words.

Press Releases

- You CANNOT break news that is sent out via press release.
- News sent out via press release is NOT exclusive.
- You should not wait for the news to come to you via press release.
 - You should be out there looking for it.

Press Releases - Hard v. Soft

- Informally, press releases can be categorized as hard and soft news.
- Hard: Provide important information on a major story.
 - Often includes a statement from key people
- Soft: Basically a pitch from a PR person.
(This is more what your textbook referred to.)

Press Releases - Hard News

- Press release is not the same as a news alert.
 - News alert is usually a brief notice sent to media outlets that alerts them to an unscheduled news conference.
 - News alerts are only sent for big stories.
 - Example: Bin Laden's death

Press Releases - Hard News

- News releases may recap news conferences.
 - Sometimes referred to as press releases.
 - These generally recap something newsworthy that occurred.
 - Presidential statements, postgame, etc.
 - Sometimes, teams, individuals, companies, etc. just release a statement via news release.
 - If using quotes from a release, make sure that is clearly sourced.

Press Releases - Hard News

- If something warrants a hard news press release, it is probably an event that you should have been there to cover.
 - You still want to check the release afterward/when writing your story.
 - Useful for confirming facts.
 - Making sure you didn't miss anything.

Press Releases - Soft News

- A note from a media or communications person alerting media to what they think is a story.
 - Sent out in mass
- Scan every release you get.
 - Often it is not a story.
 - Goes in the trash.

Press Releases - Soft News

- You do not need to respond to every PR pitch you get.
- Remember that a press release is written to paint whatever the subject of the pitch is in a favorable light.
 - News judgment.

Press Releases - Soft News

- Potential starting point for stories.
 - Does not tell the whole story.
- All releases will have a contact person's information listed.
 - Contact that person if you're interested.
 - Just because you contact someone, doesn't mean you have to do the story.
 - You're just getting more information to see IF there is a story.

PR People

- Good PR people are persistent.
 - That still doesn't mean that you run their stories.
- Develop good relationships with PR people and relevant communications people.
 - They can prove to be valuable sources.

Sources

- Story specific: Sources are people that you get information from.
 - In a story, sources are the people you cite and the places you got information.
 - Attribution
- Big picture: Sources
 - People with knowledge or ties to a given subject
 - Essential part of beat coverage

Sources

- Always be working your sources.
- Don't just call sources when you need them for a specific story.
 - Be in touch regularly.
 - Will keep you on their radar.
- Call and see if they have anything for you.
 - Have they heard anything?
- Talk to everyone, all the time.
 - People in different jobs, people at different places.
 - Not necessarily easy for introverted people.
 - Need to overcome that as a journalist.

Tips

- When someone alerts you to a potential story, it's called a "tip"
 - As in "tipped off"
- Tips can come from anywhere.
 - Often they come from your sources
 - Including PR/communications people
 - Sometimes they come from strangers
 - Can be anonymous
 - Tread especially lightly when investigating anonymous tips.

Tips

- Tipsters can be persistent.
- Many tips are worth at least making a phone call or doing a piece or two of reporting.
- “Sometimes tips check out, sometimes they don’t.”
 - Tips can lead to huge stories.
 - Tips can lead absolutely nowhere.
- Like press releases, tips are a **STARTING** point.

Tips

- Be mindful that tipsters may have a stake in story.
 - Don't hesitate to question why?
- Never pay for a tip.
 - Goes back to Ethics

Records

- Can generate story ideas.
- Not as commonly used
 - Takes time
 - Takes an understanding of what records contain
 - Then takes understanding of what's newsworthy
 - Internet does make it easier
 - Computer assisted reporting (CAR)
- Big news can come out of records reporting.

Records

- Investigative and/or enterprise reporting often uses and/or starts with records.
- Records could include
 - Police and court reports/records
 - Business filings
 - Tax records (not individuals)
 - Criminal records
 - Budgets for public institutions and corporations
 - Expense records
 - Campaign contributions
 - Non-profit donations
 - Data

Records

- Public institutions and corporations have certain records they have to release.
 - Personnel records are protected
 - Medical records are protected.
- You may need to submit a FOIA request. (Week 6)
- Criminal records and court records are always public unless sealed.
 - Juvenile records are not public
- Private individuals do not have to release records.

Localizing

- Taking a larger issue and making it a local story.
 - How does it impact your community?
 - Is this issue going on within your community?
 - How are your readers reacting to this issue?
- Can work with a national, international or state issue.
 - In sports, how issues trickle down from pro or college level.
- Can help put news in perspective for your audience.
- Way to humanize stories.

Regionalizing

- Taking an issue you see in one community and looking to see if it applies in other communities. Making it a bigger picture story.
- A kind of trend story.

Localizing v. Regionalizing

- Localizing: Taking a big story and bringing it to a more local level.
 - Big issue ---> Local
 - How it affects your community specifically
- Regionalizing: Finding a very (hyper)local story and seeing if it is part of a larger trend/issue.
 - Local ---> Bigger issue/trend
 - How it affects multiple communities
- Essentially opposites.

Follow-Up

- News doesn't just occur, then it's over.
- You should always be looking back at stories to see if they warrant follow up.
 - Usually larger stories.
 - Why?
 - What's happened since?
 - Changes?
 - Anniversaries or significant milestones
- Can vary from features to investigative reporting.

Follow-Up

- Hard news - breaking, second-day - should answer the big questions.
- Follow-ups can look at everything else.
- Follow up is not limited to major stories.
 - Votes/approvals/projects - what happens next?
 - Where are they now?
 - Etc.

Events

- Know what is on the calendar.
 - What events should you attend?
 - What events should you have on your radar?
- Being out covering events can often yield numerous story ideas.
 - Focus on what you're there to cover, but look for other possible stories
- Few substitutes for on-site reporting as far as both reporting and generating ideas.

Unannounced Stories

“Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.”

- Seneca, First-century Roman philosopher

“The harder I practice, the luckier I get.”

- Jack Nicklaus

Unannounced Stories

- Good stories do not just come about because a reporter gets “lucky.”
- Good reporters are always on the look out for potential stories.
- Good reporters are always trying to think of their next story or more stories.

Stay Alert

- Keep your eyes and ears open.
 - OBSERVE
 - LISTEN
- Look for things out of the ordinary. (Both literal and figurative.)
- Look for trends. (Both literal and figurative.)

Stay Alert

- Recognize that anything could be a story.
- Stories can be found anywhere.
- Listen for things that pique your interest.

Brainstorm

- Formally or informally
- Think of every possible story/element you could cover.
- Think of every question you could flesh out.
- Think of every angle you could take.
- What hasn't been covered? Why?

Change of Scenery

- Wander.
 - Physically
- Do things differently to try to get a new perspective.
- Break in routine.
- Change position.
 - Physically

Reading

- Good journalists should read A LOT.
 - Literature
 - Magazines
 - Other outlets
- Exposes you to good writing, which can help strengthen your writing.
- Gives you sources you can reference.

Reading

- Always read your competitors.
 - Know what they are writing.
 - Make sure you're not missing things they're covering.
- Can be the source of ideas.
 - Look for little things that jump out at you.
 - Anecdotes that could be fleshed out
 - Interesting characters

Reading

- Diversify what you're reading.
 - Blogs, magazines, books, news outlets.
 - Also read up on different topics.
 - Make you more well-rounded
 - Can inspire and/or find interesting ideas

Questioning

- Being a journalist gives you license to ask questions.
- Question everything.
- What would you like to know?
 - Ask it.
 - Sometimes it's a boring answer. Sometimes it's a story.

Interviews

- Interviews can be a great source of story ideas.
- Someone might say something that isn't a fit for the story you're interviewing them for, but could lead to another story.
 - Could also come up in discussion after the interview is over.

Interviews

- If an interview for Story A sparks an idea for Story B idea...
 - You often can use the A quotes if Story B is similar in subject.
 - When possible, try to make clear when that quote was said and/or context
 - Depending on story/circumstance, you may want to touch base with the interview subject
 - Probably for follow-up/more information for Story B
 - If Story B is a very different topic from Story A, you should ask your interview subject before quoting from Interview A
 - Avoids any issue of you having misrepresented what you were working on.

Notes/Briefs

- News releases or other recaps often have notes
 - Sports events/Teams always have notes
- Notes may contain facts, background, small pieces of information
 - Can be a great resource to mine for story ideas
- News outlets often run notebooks and/or briefs
 - Look for items that might warrant elaboration

Web

- See what people are talking about on the Web.
 - Read blogs
 - Visit forums
 - Read
 - Check sites
 - Browse
 - What's trending?
 - Google Search
 - Yahoo Search
 - Yahoo Buzz

Social Media

- Follow people relevant to your beat.
 - Sources
 - People you cover
 - Your competitors
 - Other media
 - RSS feed
- Engage with your audience.
 - Solicit ideas

Periphery

- Look for stories that are related, but are being overlooked.
- What might develop into a larger story?
- Who is someone that might have a compelling story or play an interesting role?
- Everyone is focusing straight ahead. What's going on off to the sides?

When Inspiration Strikes

- Always have something handy to jot down an idea when it comes to you.
 - Notebook
 - iPhone
- You might not remember it in the morning.
- Jot down things that might be worth a story. Go back to those lists occasionally.