

The Key To A Successful News Article Begins Before You Write The First Word

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1. Assignment

Know expectations and deadline

Make sure you have a clear understanding of the expectation and the deadline.

If you are unclear, be sure to clarify with the assigning editor. It is important that you are both working off the same page. Understand your assignment, what is expected and the deadline.

If anything happens that is going to impact you fulfilling your assignment and/or meeting deadline, alert the editor ASAP. It's always better to work out changes as soon as you know instead of waiting until closer to the deadline or worse, missing the deadline without notice or explanation.

Do homework/research

Do as much homework and research as you can ahead of time.

Find bios, background, etc., from other printed sources and pull the basic info you need out of that then verify the info with the sources when you do the interviews. That is faster than getting it all from scratch.

Read up on the issue, person, event, etc. (whatever the assignment is) and know as much as possible about it before starting the interviews. You will be able to ask better questions and get to the heart of the story faster, not having to spend as much time with surface-level questions.

Know and understand as much as possible, but be careful not to be influenced too heavily by another newspaper's account of the story. The temptation to plagiarize comes in without you even realizing it if you focus too much on other newspaper articles.

If you do decide to use something in your article another paper has reported, be sure to attribute it.

If possible don't do that, call and ask the question yourself, verify the fact or get the information from your interviews, so you are writing your own story rather than compiling

information. Sometimes we have no choice due to the timing or situation. In this case, attribute appropriately.

2. Gather thoughts on the story.

Review original assignment

After doing the items mentioned in #1 above, go back to the assignment to remind yourself what it is and check against the research you have done.

Make sure you are clear about what is taking place and begin to organize because once you read background information and do research, you will have much more information than just what your focus is supposed to be.

If the assignment and your research are not matching up, be open to pitching a new focus or sidebar to the editor because you are the one in the field. You might discover a better angle to the story or maybe a related story that could run with the original assignment. But there also may be a reason why the assignment is what it is and it may need to stay just as it was originally assigned. So, once the focus is decided make sure everyone is clear on what is being written.

Develop questions

Develop a “have-to” list. These are the basics questions you have to ask (such as the five Ws — who, what, when, where, why — and how). There will be certain things you must ask that will be specific to that story. Think about what you need and make a list. Take the list with you to the interview. By having this list ready, you can check the questions off during the interview and not spend mental energy worrying that you will forget to ask something important.

You also need to develop a source list. Note the sources you know that you need to call, realizing more will come once you begin the interviewing process.

Make appointments

If at all possible, always give your sources notice about an interview. Do not call the minute you need the interview.

If you have access to the person’s e-mail address that is a great way to make the introduction and ask for an appointment.

This will give them the heads up without you having to risk them wanting to talk right then and you not being ready.

If you don't have an e-mail address, go ahead and make the initial call. It is always goes over better if the person has a heads up and can schedule. Let him or her know what you are working on and why you are contacting him or her. Suggest some times or give the person the timeframe in which you would like to do the interview.

Decide type of interview

Determine whether the interview will be conducted in person, by phone or by e-mail (e-mail is acceptable in some cases and is sometimes good to use for getting one comment or facts and figures but is not the preferred method of interviewing).

If you can be there to see it, smell it, observe it, then do. It almost always makes a 100 percent difference in the story.

But if you cannot, be prepared to pull as much information as possible from the source, so you can almost see it, smell it and taste it yourself.

In fact, be prepared to ask them specifically what things looked like, seemed like, smelled like.

3. The interview.

Be prepared

Before you go into an interview, make sure you are on time and that you have all essentials with you — notebook, pen, extra pen (in case yours runs out of ink), “have-to” list of questions, etc.

Recording devices are fine to use as long as you don't depend on them solely. Electronic devices do malfunction sometimes and batteries can die. A recorder should be used only as a back up in case an important quote was missed or you need the interview recorded for liability purposes.

A writer should never go back and listen to the entire interview again and attempt to take notes by capturing every word from the recording before starting to write.

This tempts the writer to use every single word that was spoken in the story because you have access to every word. It also causes the writer to take much longer to write the story than is necessary. Going through the interview twice is unnecessary except in the most unusual of circumstances. Be prepared to be focused and alert in the original interview, keeping up with the source and staying attune to what is really important for the story. Then only go back to the recording if there is a certain quote you want to check or flesh out a little more.

Also, be sensitive about when it is appropriate to use a recording device. There may be a condition in place that the interview not be recorded. Or if it causes tension for the source, then you will not get as good of an interview.

When conducting the interview, flag your notes when you know that section will definitely be used in your story. That will help you organize your story more quickly after the interview, but it will also help you find quotes in the recording if you do record the interview and want to go back to get something.

Asking questions

Once the interview is underway, ask the “have-to” questions as they fall naturally, but let the rest of the questions and interview go where it goes ... do not just ask your original questions and say goodbye. Listen to the person, be flexible, be willing to tangent. Basically, chase rabbits.

I’ve found some of my best quotes and many times my lead from just letting the person wander off for a minute, but you have to pay attention when the source chases rabbits or you might miss something really good.

During the interview, ask open-ended questions rather than yes/no. Just have a conversation with them.

Don’t put words in their mouth like “This must have been really hard on you.” Rather, ask: “Can you tell me what it was like to go through this?”

Do not ask vague questions? Be direct and clear.

If you do not understand what the person said or meant, ask, clarify.

Always ask how to spell a person’s name and title. Write and have them look at it, have them write it or write it down and spell it back to them, make sure they are focusing on you.

We had a situation where the person agreed to the writer’s spelling of his own name, but it was incorrect in the end because the interviewee wasn’t really paying attention when the writer spelled it back and just agreed that it was correct.

And when getting factual information, get all of it. For instance, don’t be satisfied with the fact that he is a member of Mount Zion Baptist Church. Where? What city? What association? There are numerous Mount Zion Baptist churches in the Alabama.

4. Selecting sources

More than one source

Always interview more than one source.

Try for objective sources when it is a feature on a personality, not just the person and his or her spouse. If the feature is on a minister, look for another minister who has known him for a while or someone in another position that can comment.

Look past the obvious

Get more information than you will need and always look for the next person who should be interviewed. Don't take the easy way out and call the main source and then the second source and put the story together with what you have. Work on it, develop it, does it need more work, yes it could be finished now, but it could be better if...

Think local, consider the audience

Consider the audience and reach of the publication/organization for which you are writing. Be sure to localize the story that way. If it is a national or international organization, then it will need a national or international tie even though it may be about one specific place. If the reach is a smaller area, then all larger stories need to be localized to that area to make it relevant to the readers.

5. Dealing with the information

Review original assignment

Once you have all the interviews done, go back to the original assignment and remind yourself what you are after because now you will have more information than you need and it will be easy to get lost in it.

Be selective

Remember, just because you have the information does not mean you have to use it.

You must cull, you must make decisions, no matter how good the information is. Just because you captured a great sound bite does not mean that you have to use it, especially if it has nothing to do with the story you are writing.

Five W's

Your musts are the five W's — who, what, when, where, why — and how.

Do you understand the story? Could you tell someone about it with authority and confidence? If not, what questions do you have? Ask them.

6. Writing the story

Accuracy is vital

As you prepare to write, remember the publication's credibility and integrity is on the line with every word written by every person. Don't be lazy. Make sure you have all the facts and they have been verified.

Accuracy is vital. You are retelling a story based on facts, stats, personal comments.

Be thorough and “get it”

Be thorough and clear up any discrepancies. If you aren't sure, then the reader will certainly not be.

Edit your copy

Attribute all quotes, but don't over quote.

You are the wordsmith. The easy way out is to just quote person one, then next person, next person, next person.

But you are the storyteller, tell the story. Use the best quotes and use them sparingly.

Two sentences per quote is a maximum.

If no quotable material, paraphrase and attribute to the person, but try to pull at least two or three quotes from each source.

Do not retell what you have told with your writing and the quoting.

For example:

The church sold its property at a reduced price in order to make the deadline and help its sister church.

“We were happy to sell the property at a lower price to our sister church because it helped us meet the deadline,” said Pastor Ron Jones.

Be brief

Write with brevity.

It is easy to write, but it is hard to write tightly. We have limited space and readers with short attention spans. We must tell them the story as quickly as possible.

Do not use chronological order when writing.

Stick with strong verbs, no fluffy adjectives and avoid clichés.

Don't be redundant.

Easter Sunday, completely destroyed

Take out non-meaning words — that, really, very...

Be clear

Write with clarity:

Be clear. You want to inform your readers, not confuse them.

Simple language, avoid jargon, short sentences.

Transitions are vital. You must weave the story, not just throw information down, then move to the next piece of information.

7. Always the student

Continue learning and growing by doing a few simple things:

Read good writing. Look for award-winning publications that use the type of writing you are doing. Observe how the writers put together their stories and what seems to be consistent in the various stories.

Attend workshops and conferences. Continuing education always helps us sharpen our skills and learn what's new in the field.

Read the edited version of your story. This could possibly be one of the most simple, yet most helpful, forms of improving your writing. Always compare what you submitted with what was printed. Most often you can see how the story was improved, but if you don't understand a change, always ask so you will know the reasoning and can apply the principles the next time.

8. Develop relationships

You will want to keep this in mind with all stories you do, especially if you have a beat where you call the same sources over and over.

Know your sources

Learn their ways, their likes and dislikes, work with them, get to know them, become their friend.

Keep commitments

Always do what you say you will do. If you promise to send them a paper, be sure to do that. If you commit to attending an event, show up.

This is vital for you and for your publication.

You are building bridges, developing a name for yourself and ensuring that the publication is respected.