

By Les Sillars

I. Introduction

Newspaper readers (and sometimes new reporters) often wonder, “Where do they get all those ideas for stories?” Talented reporters come up with story ideas. A journalist may have the literary talent of Homer and the tenacity of a bulldog, but if he cannot generate good ideas he is of limited use as a reporter.

Some stories are obvious, especially for reporters with specific areas of responsibility. These areas are known as “beats” (as in, to “beat the bushes” looking for a story) and in large news organizations the word refers to well-covered topics such as the courts, or crime, or even a particular organization. Sports writers have to cover tonight’s game and political writers have to cover the legislature’s latest votes.

Reporters at smaller organizations may not have assigned beats, but in both cases great journalists, while providing the necessary coverage of the required stories, look beyond the surface to investigate why things are as they are. They also, and this is crucial, use their background knowledge to anticipate and interpret events. Great reporters “keep on top” of events because they have found out or can guess what’s going to happen and prepare for it.

II. The Keys to Finding Stories

How do they do it? The key principles are: 1. Keep in touch with the right people; 2. Keep your eyes open; and 3. Keep reading.

1. Keep in touch

The best reporters are those who establish solid, trusting relationships with the people and organizations relevant to their beat. A sports writer with responsibility for the local baseball team has to get to know the players and team officials, league administrators, and so on, while city hall reporters try to meet not only local politicians but also clerks, officials, and city workers of all kinds.

How to get to know them? It takes time. Reporters often meet a few new people each time they research a new story. The key is to keep in touch with helpful sources via occasional phone calls or emailing, or by stopping by to chat with those who seem most open. It’s normal for a reporter to call up a source from an earlier story to ask what’s going on. Sources who only hear from rushed reporters working on deadline are less likely to offer new ideas, information, or insight. A reporter’s most valuable assets, his relationships with trusted sources, help him keep in front of events.

The same principles apply for general reporters in smaller contexts, such as small-town weekly newspapers -- only there the beats are less well-defined. A reporter will get to know the mayor and town councilors because he will necessarily speak to him or her regularly. It’s important to be out in the community meeting people in all sorts of contexts where you might go anyway: sports events, church activities, political fund-raisers, gyms—anywhere people gather and strike up conversations.

The key is to be friendly and genuinely interested in other people and their situations. A casual conversation with a doctor after a meeting for church business on a Saturday morning led one reporter to a story about how the continuing implementation of electronic medical records at a local hospital would affect physicians. The doctor started talking about changes in his practice and the new frustration, inconvenience, and expense -- and how the changes were undermining the quality of patient care.

The point: learn to ask questions when dealing with other people even in social contexts, not just when reporting a story. Earn respect. Show concern for others by inquiring about them and their lives. Do not be like those whose eyes glaze over and their attention wanders until it's their turn to talk again, or who respond to every single statement with, "Well, I . . ." Let other people talk about themselves for a while.

But don't go too far; avoid manipulating sources by acting friendlier than is warranted. Do not abuse the relationship with overuse. Don't treat human beings made in God's image as objects. Don't be friendly because you're looking for a story; be friendly because you should be, and stories will come to you. When dealing with someone who is primarily a source (as opposed to a friend), be cordial, professional, even warm at times, but do not pretend that the relationship is something more than it is. People can spot that and resent feeling used, but they respect reporters who are open about what they're doing. Rookie reporters and journalism students, of course, usually know very few people relevant to their issues. How do they get started? By applying these second and third principles.

2. Keep your eyes open

In one sense this is literal advice, particularly for local reporters, because it leads to questions. What new building is going up on that plot of land north of town? Who paid for that pro-life billboard? Why are so many downtown storefronts empty? Why is the mayor sitting in the town jail?

But it also applies to journalists with larger audiences because local observations sometimes point to stories of larger significance. A few inquiries into a local charity's practices might lead to a much bigger story with national implications. For example, a food bank in one town began handing out brochures promising free cell phones to clients. A few questions and some online research led to a story about how Latin America's largest wireless network had set up a scheme to have a U.S. federal program subsidize its national marketing campaign to low-income people.

A reporter also has to keep his eyes open figuratively. Be alert to possible story ideas in the experiences of friends and acquaintances. What are people talking about?

Complaining about?

Try to be creative and look for connections. Say you see lots of children with braces on their teeth. You might wonder if orthodontics has exploded in popularity over the past few decades – and if so, what are the implications? That leads to a host of related questions:

The economics of orthodontics: cost, size and growth of the industry

The history of orthodontics: how did braces first develop, and how have they changed over the years?

Finally, what does the desire for perfect teeth say about our culture?

Here's another example. A radio ad for the 30th anniversary tour of an all-female pop group founded in 1981, The Go-Go's, sparked a story for WORLD Virginia. A reporter did background research and then talked concert-goers about how they think feminism had changed over 30 years.

Good reporters also look to find ways to apply current stories to their own contexts and publications. Usually this takes the form of "localizing" a national story by reporting on how a national trend or event affects a local community. How has the recession affected local businesses? How have federal laws, such as health care reform, affected local

doctors, hospitals, and patients? What do local voters think about the current crop of presidential candidates?

Journalists also frequently find ways to make existing stories relevant to their particular audiences. For example, a May 26, 2011, *Washington Post* story headlined “D.C. region’s Asian population is up 60 percent since 2000, census data show” sparked an idea for WORLD Virginia about how the large increase in the Asian population has affected Asian churches in northern Virginia, the area that saw most of that growth. Reporters discovered that, in addition to significant church growth, Asian pastors frequently struggle to balance the needs of the ABCs and the OBCs—that is, between the American-born church members, mostly younger people, and those born overseas who immigrated to the U.S.

Here’s another example: In June, 2011, as potential Republican candidates for the 2012 presidential election positioned themselves for the GOP primary season, WORLD ran a cover story examining whether Democrats who knew about former House Speaker Newt Gingrich’s affair during the 1990s pressured him to violate the trust his Republican teammates had placed in him. Most WORLD readers probably knew at least a little about Gingrich’s infidelity and that he had announced a new campaign. That, by itself, wasn’t news for our audience, but WORLD connected the dots: How did Gingrich’s private actions affect public policy, and what did his recklessness then say about whether GOP leaders and voters should back his candidacy for the presidency now.

3. Read, keep reading, and then read some more

Imagine an airline pilot who couldn’t be bothered to read the weather reports or a surgeon who didn’t have the time to read medical journals explaining the latest developments in operating techniques. Would such a person deserve to be trusted?

For reporters, keeping up with the news is much like that. Journalists need to read the news so they know what’s going on both in their own fields and in society in general. That background allows them to gather information to spot trends and develop their own original story ideas while not repeating stories their readers have seen elsewhere. Very few things, from an audience perspective, are as annoying as realizing partway through a story that they’ve already read a very similar story a few days earlier in another publication.

Just as important is the need to keep up with “the news” in society. Journalists can’t separate the recording of events from their interpretation. To interpret properly, to place events in context, to understand the background to almost anything that happens, a good journalist needs a wide-ranging knowledge of the world at large.

Take, for example, an Associated Press story headlined, “ACLU: Students should be able to post Commandments.”

Floyd, Va.--A civil-liberties group says Floyd County High School students should be allowed to post copies of the Ten Commandments on their lockers. The ACLU of Virginia said Friday it e-mailed a letter to Principal Barry Hollandsworth urging him to allow students to keep the biblical texts up because they're a form of personal expression, as opposed to school-imposed religion. Students organized an effort to post the Ten Commandments on their lockers in light of events in nearby Giles County, where the school board voted this week to remove them from the school walls a month after ordering them to be posted. The ACLU and the Freedom From Religion Foundation had threatened legal action,

saying putting up the commandments was an unconstitutional government endorsement of Christianity.

"Schools have the authority to ban all displays on school property," ACLU of Virginia executive director Kent Willis said in a release. "But if a school allows students to post some kinds of personal messages on their lockers, it must also allow other kinds of messages, including those that have religious content."

A journalist would need to know that the ACLU frequently sues and threatens to sue school districts that have religious displays of any kind to realize how unusual it is, on the surface, for that organization to make such a statement. He would also need to know the long history of conflict, legal and otherwise, in America over such displays, and that the battles over them raise strong passions in many people because they have huge symbolic significance. That's why a story about what would seem to be a relatively minor skirmish over a couple of posters warrants attention from readers across a state.

But to understand another dimension of the news, a journalist would also need to realize that the ACLU and groups like it, such as the Freedom From Religion Foundation, have succeeded in making school officials so skittish that they frequently censor perfectly legal religious displays. That is why the WORLD Virginia story on the skirmish had the headline, "Too careful" -- and the reporter emphasized the irony:

Given that civil liberties groups had threatened a neighboring school district over a display of the Ten Commandments, when Floyd County high school students started plastering copies of the verses on their lockers school officials apparently felt they couldn't be too careful.

Maybe they could.

Just days after the public school district in Giles County, just west of Roanoke, removed a public display of the Ten Commandments under the threat of litigation from the Freedom From Religion Foundation, students in neighboring Floyd County began posting the verses on their lockers in protest.

Liberty Counsel, a Christian religious freedom group based in Orlando, Fla., "said it was told that administrators removed copies of the Ten Commandments placed by members of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes on Thursday at Floyd High," according to the Roanoke Times. In a letter to the Floyd County school board, Liberty Counsel chairman Matt Staver demanded that the school reverse its decision and allow the students to display the Ten Commandments.

In a press release the ACLU, which normally opposes religious displays in schools, agreed. Both groups asserted that if schools allow students to post personal expressions on their lockers, they cannot ban some displays but allow others. "What they can't do is selectively censor," Staver said, according to the Times, "and that is exactly what the school is doing."

Floyd County High School Principal Barry Hollandsworth told the Times "that the school system's attorney was looking into the matter. He declined to elaborate."

The point is that to cover this education story properly, a journalist would need general background knowledge of American history and religion, recent school-related controversies regarding religious displays, the administration of public schools, and the positions of major organizations that address religious freedom issues.

Without that background knowledge, a reporter is simply stuck. So a principal ordered some students to take down some posters with Bible verses on them—so what? A well-informed reporter, on the other hand, will immediately grasp the significance of events and put them into context for readers -- in this case, the larger cultural war to define religious freedom in America.

The idea that a reporter needs knowledge of society to report on it applies in all contexts and all subjects. The state of the economy, for example, has implications for everything from sports to politics to movies to homeland security to, well, everything. Woe to the lazy reporter who misses a potential story because he just didn't see the significance. Spotting significance is what reporters do—it's how they find stories—and they can't do that without keeping up with the news.

Journalists need not be news junkies, glued to their TVs, computers or smartphones waiting for the latest, greatest, breaking news update. They should have a regular reading list and schedule that includes news from a variety of sources. Many WORLD reporters scan publications on the left like the New York Times, Washington Post, Huffington Post, and Daily Kos, and ones on the right like National Review, Drudge Report, Weekly Standard, and the editorial page of the Wall Street Journal.

Similarly, they often drop in on both NPR and FOX News and visit sites like RealClearPolitics.com or Instapundit that aggregate links to interesting stories from dozens of sources. They do so with the expectation not of getting “the news” but of getting different perspectives on what these organizations consider the news to be. The bottom line is that there is literally a world of stories out there waiting to be covered. Go find them.

Exercises:

1. Pick a publication and a beat for which you would like, one day, to write—to cover sports for your local daily, for example, the stock market for the Wall Street Journal, or pro-life issues for WORLD. Make up a list of 20 publications you would need to read regularly to stay on top of your beat.

Do not limit yourself to news media. Include at least five publications from think tanks, lobby groups, or other specialized organizations that have significant influence on your beat.

2. Develop three story ideas in the following ways:

- A. Call a friend or acquaintance who has knowledge of some newsworthy field. Explain that you're doing a journalism exercise in finding news story ideas and ask what's happening in his or her field that people might want to know about.

- B. Pick a recent story in your local newspaper and brainstorm for ways to advance it. Just ask yourself, “What questions does this story raise or leave unanswered that would illuminate the people, issues, or background to this particular event?”

- C. From the reading you assembled in question 1, find one story that would be suitable for that publication.