

Developing Story Ideas

Communicators are expected to develop the majority of stories on which they work; writers have to realize it is up to them to generate good story ideas. If you don't come up with your own winning ideas, you'll be dependent on someone else to generate your work assignments. Think ahead and get great concepts, so you can spend your time writing great stories that serve your audience well. Many of the following tips were developed at a communications workshop.

- 1) Regularly ask, "Are we writing stories that reflect the entire community and not just a select group or groups?"
- 2) Brainstorm around a single topic. For example, a discussion about a school cafeteria or area restaurants could lead to stories on the nutritional values of the food most people are eating, whether accommodations are made for vegetarians, why people tend to segregate themselves by race at meals and other places, the hard work that cafeteria/restaurant workers do for generally low wages, the selling of sodas and restaurant-chain food in schools, efforts to recycle, etc. Another example is to build on an offhand comment like, "Biology class is so boring." Keep asking "why?" Interesting story angles will tumble out, such as outdated books, an overcrowded class, no labs, no funds for field trips, etc.
- 3) Ask yourself what the people in your community are talking about. What is the gab? Think about it and break it down – why is it interesting, and how can you illuminate it further?
- 4) On a Monday, ask people what they did over the weekend. This can lead to good ideas – for example, a story about how the lives of today's young people are busier than what their parents experienced during their youth, from less sleep to more hours spent at part-time jobs.
- 5) Look at the big picture and the small picture. Big picture: are there any trends over time that can be explored and used in informing your community to its betterment? Small picture: Knowing the tiniest details about your community makes you a better reporter/editor. Those details can be shared in slice-of-life stories. They can also be put together in assessing what's going on to look at the big picture.

'Evergreen' story ideas

"Evergreen" story ideas are those that are fairly universal – you can gather them and then use them when you have a newshole you can't fill in the future. They can be made interesting with a wide range of sources. Here are some examples:

- Plight of the area poor and the ways people can help by working at food pantry, Habitat for Humanity, buying products made by disabled people, etc.
- Cars, licenses, insurance, license plates, car tax, gas prices, parking.
- Tips on staying physically fit and healthy.
- Favorite foods, snack foods.
- Shadow community professionals—interview them about their careers, etc.

- Profile famous alums/former community members.
- Find out about historical markers near school or profile your school's history.
- Food recipes — ethnic foods, special meals, diet fare.
- Run a trivia contest.
- Fashion items.
- Profile people who volunteer part-time.
- Car care tips.
- Fitness of local fire department and ability to respond.
- Registering so you can vote in local, regional and national elections.
- Sound off – run features that consist of side-by-side, pro & con articles about an issue (with headshots of interviewees).
- Do in-depth stories on health issues such as anorexia, depression, diabetes, etc.
- Cover employment figures – where the hot jobs are in the nation and region.
- Write about concerns of people living in the digital age.
- By the numbers – a regular graphic showing numerical information about your area that could be of interest.

Generating story ideas

Following are more ways to jog your mind and find good story ideas:

- Check area, regional and national news sources – it's easy to do online.
- Check Internet sites of publications to which your audience can relate.
- Check other print sources of all kinds: billboards/ads/meeting minutes/blogs
- Talk with public relations people.
- Talk with community people - coaches, counselors, secretaries, executives.
- Talk with people on area advisory groups or councils.
- Talk with student government members and other young community leaders.
- Ask people about unusual jobs and hobbies, clubs they belong to, people they know who are involved in interesting activities.
- Take note of any change in the landscape – new stores, street work, etc.
- Look at area sports calendars, civic calendars and school calendars.
- Ask your friends what they would like to see a news story about.
- Survey people on a controversial topic.
- Follow the money – always ask “Why?” and find the source.
- Watch regional and national news for stories you can localize.
- Check out other media for new technology or products to write about yourself.
- Play “detective” – ask questions about everything. Be curious.
- Find out about odd laws, rules, etc. and why they are on the books.
- Attend community events and meetings and talk to the people who attend.

- Remember that everything is a story idea – keep your eyes and ears open!