

# Journalism

## CAREER GUIDE

INSTITUTE FOR  
HUMANE  
STUDIES  
AT GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

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# Introduction

By John Elliott

This guide is for journalists in the first years of their careers. As journalism programs director at the Institute for Humane Studies, I deal primarily with undergraduates and graduate students from the ages of 20 to 26. Since coming to IHS in the spring of 2008, I have mentored four classes of interns. This guide reflects my experiences helping my mentees move from school newspapers through internships into first jobs.

Seven established journalists contributed chapters to the guide, which focuses mainly on print journalism. Matt Welch is editor of *Reason* magazine. Mollie Hemingway is a freelance journalist in Washington, D.C. Megan Ward edits the *Shelby Star* in Shelby, North Carolina. Lene Johansen is a freelance journalist in Philadelphia. Josiah Ryan reports for *The Hill* newspaper. Abby Alger directs New Media at the Leadership Institute, and Brian DeNeve is morning anchor in Madison, Wisconsin, for Wisconsin Radio News. Most of the contributors have been journalists for 10 to 20 years and provide practical advice and anecdotes from their own careers. They are counselors and role models for rising journalists. I am looking forward to introducing future interns to counselors and role models in

other media, such as television news, in the next edition of this guide.

I want to thank the Management Team at the Institute for Humane Studies for their support. Chad Wilcox, head of the Communicator’s Section at IHS and my supervisor, has been a constant source of encouragement. I also want to thank Jennifer Zambone and Emma Elliott for editing the contributions.

## Career planning for the undergraduate

If you are an undergraduate, then you are well-positioned for a good start in journalism. The first thing you need to know is that you don’t have to major in journalism. Journalism is learned on the job.

I spent 20 years working for Dutch media, in print, radio, and television. But I have never had a single college course in journalism. When the publisher of a Dutch newspaper asked me to be an American-based freelancer, I did not possess any formal credentials. But I was qualified: I loved the news, could write fast and could put together the elements of a story fairly quickly. I simply started writing for the newspaper.

I recommend that you major in a subject like philosophy, economics, history, political science, a foreign language, or a hard science. Your undergraduate major should involve serious reading, thinking, and writing. Philosophy might be the best undergraduate major for a future journalist. As a journalist, you should have knowledge of economics, political science, and history. If you major in journalism, the required courses in that major will crowd out these core subjects.

Some of my best interns attended St. John’s College, and their work has benefitted from the school’s “great books” curriculum—from Homer to Marx—and its strong emphasis on writing and Socratic discussion. Wherever you are enrolled, you should use your undergraduate studies to read in the classical liberal canon. If you

have to pay tuition to a university staffed by enemies of liberty, you can at least get your libertarian money's worth. Look for course offerings where you can read John Locke, Adam Smith, the Federalists and Anti-Federalists, Alexis de Tocqueville, J.S. Mill, Lord Acton, Ludwig von Mises, and Friedrich Hayek.

Reading a quality newspaper and writers whose style and content are worthy of emulation should be part of your career planning, so should regular engagement with ideas. IHS is committed to helping you do this at all stages of your career. We offer weekend and week-long seminars in the ideas for undergraduate and graduate students. In addition, IHS cooperates with the Liberty Fund to offer weekend Advanced Topic Seminars for graduates and professionals. The "AT's" bring 15 journalists together to discuss readings in the classical liberal canon, such as Hayek and Tocqueville. In addition, you should attend Foundation for Economic Education (FEE) or CATO seminars. These are excellent opportunities to spend time dealing with classical liberal ideas and meet a lot of smart people.

During the school year, you should consider participating in a group like Students for Liberty. But you may wish to avoid a leadership role to have enough time for your journalism activities.

## **No one cares about your opinion: REPORT for the college newspaper**

If your university has a newspaper, you should report for it. I want to emphasize the word "report." Many applicants for journalism internships send me opinion pieces as their writing samples. The problem is that everyone—liberal, conservative, libertarian, etc.—wants to write opinion. But you will only make a career through reporting. If your goal is to land on the editorial page, then you will only get there by producing quality news pieces.

This means writing about student council meetings, dormitory fires, auto accidents on campus, bake sales by student clubs and rising tuition. Editors not sympathetic to classical liberal thinking will run most of the student newspapers, but aspiring libertarian journalists should not be deterred by that. I have had two excellent interns who wrote for the *Daily Californian* at UC-Berkeley. You need to get reporting experience, and you should get it any way you can.

If your school has an alternative conservative or libertarian paper, you could also write for it. (The Collegiate Network and the Leadership Institute support a network of college newspapers.) But don't let that become the opportunity to start writing opinion. Stick to reporting.

You may be at a university or college where there is no opportunity to write for a school newspaper. If so, then you should consider writing for the Student Free Press Association. The SFPA offers students the opportunity to publish online. The SFPA has an agreement with Fox News to publish its best articles on the Fox News website.

No time? Some applicants have told me that, between their studies and part-time work or even sports, they don't have time to write for the school newspaper. I sympathize with the work load. But if you cannot make time to write for the school newspaper during your undergrad, then you should probably choose another line of work.

If you are more interested in radio or television, then campus broadcast facilities may offer an opportunity to get hands on experience. I still think that every journalist—radio or television—should be able to write. Reporting for a newspaper remains a fundamental skill you need to master.

## The internship

If you are serious about a career in print, then I recommend that

you first intern at a smaller newspaper. You may think that you would make a good intern at *The New York Times*. But the road there or to *The Washington Post* may run through Brownsville, Texas.

I like to send my print interns to the Freedom Communication newspapers in North Carolina, Florida, Texas, and Arizona. I know that they will receive editorial oversight and return with a bunch of clips. One such intern, Neal Morton, a recent graduate of the University of Nevada-Reno, wrote an article every day for the *McAllen Monitor*. He was subsequently hired.

In fact, many IHS interns are hired by the media outlets where they intern. This applies to print and television both. Hope Hodge of King's College in New York City interned at the *Jacksonville North Carolina Herald* after her sophomore year of college. The next summer she interned at the *New York Sun*. Following graduation, Hope was hired by the *Herald*. She now covers Camp Lejeune as the paper's military correspondent. Kristi Skowronski went to Fox 29 Television News in Philadelphia as an intern. She now works full time as a producer.

IHS is not the only organization which offers internships. The National Journalism Center offers fall, spring and summer internships at media outlets in Washington, D.C. The Collegiate Network has both summer internships and year-long fellowships. The SFPA has paid internships. The Collegiate Network and the SFPA in particular have a good track record in finding jobs for their former interns.

## Graduate students and recent grads

About one-third of my interns are graduate students, law students, or recent grads. If you belong to that category and want to pursue a career in journalism, you are not starting too late.

If you are a graduate student, you too should write for the

school newspaper. The only thing standing in your way is pride. One of my interns already had a JD. She decided to begin a graduate program and wanted to get into journalism. She went to the university's newspaper and started churning out news articles, alongside 18-year old freshmen. Gloria Lloyd, a grad student at Duke, freelances for local papers.

If you have already graduated, then you will need to find ways to get reporting experience. A paid internship is one means. A second option is self-financing an internship with part-time employment or savings. Due to heavy layoffs, most newspapers are understaffed. If you approach a city editor about interning two or three days a week, the chances are good that the editor won't send you away. Self-financing an internship represents an alternative to the masters in journalism.

## The master's in journalism?

If you have already completed your undergraduate work and discovered a call to journalism, you may think that you need a master's in journalism to get into the profession. Kevin Williamson of *National Review* says that he does not know any unemployed graduates of Columbia University's journalism master's program. He also says that a master's in journalism is one means to acquire clips.

Indeed, the master's in journalism can help you acquire skills and clips. But you need to carefully consider the costs and benefits. In particular, you need to ask how much student-loan debt you will acquire. A year at the Columbia School of Journalism may very well get you your first job. But the salary at this job may not be enough to service the loan debt. My major concern with a master's in journalism is that the student loan debt will actually force you out of journalism.

Let me provide an example. Katherine Timpf was an IHS intern

at Fox Business News in Los Angeles in 2010. She was an easy choice for an internship. During her four years at Hillsdale College, she reported for the school newspaper and edited it her senior year. In 2009, she interned at the *Washington Times*. When she arrived at the journalism seminar in 2010, she informed me that she had been accepted into the Columbia School of Journalism. I told her that she did not need the master's. She had already acquired the necessary skills. But that argument did not sway her. The allure of the Columbia degree was hard to resist.

But the prestige of this degree came with a price tag. Katherine told me that her financial aid package to Columbia included over \$50,000 in student loans. I encouraged her to postpone her decision for a year. She finally agreed. It turned out to be a good decision. During her internship at Fox Business News, Katherine started working in the radio-news section. She then found an internship at KFI Radio, the largest talk radio/news station in Los Angeles. The news director liked her so much that he helped her find a job at Airwatch Radio in Los Angeles. IHS and the Leadership Institute helped out with a stipend, and she worked part time as a waitress. Thus, after a year, she had a foothold in a radio-news career in Los Angeles. Money is tight, and waitressing will remain part of her life for the time being. But she has no crushing student loan debt.

Say, for instance, you had \$25,000 to put towards the Columbia degree. You could also use that to finance a year-long internship at a media outlet. You would emerge from the year with a lot of experience and clips. You wouldn't have a master's degree. But you wouldn't have any student loan debt either.

## The seven lean years

You may be frightened away from journalism by the large num-

ber of layoffs in the news industry between 2008 and 2010, and reports that traditional media continue to struggle.

Don't be. The news industry has been shedding its older, more expensive workers, but if you are in your twenties and flexible, there is work. Twenty-two of my interns found their first job in 2010 and 14 more this year.

You can find work, but your salary during the first years will not be very good. The television network news programs usually pay \$25,000 to starting producers. Newspapers pay about the same to cub reporters. In his contribution, Matt Welch remarks that a car payment might be enough to push you over the edge. You will probably need to supplement your income with freelancing and even a part-time job. You will also need to live frugally.

But that first job represents your foot in the door of what can be a satisfying and lucrative career. IHS is committed to helping you get that foothold and move forward during the lean years. The internships are one tool. The AT's are another. The journalism program will be increasing the number of career development seminars in 2011-2012. These seminars will look at freelancing, pitching articles, and changing jobs. They will provide a forum for networking as well. And, of course, as journalism programs director, I can provide mentoring and counsel.

I hope that you will consider IHS as a partner in your career.

## Confounding the sourpusses:

Seven steps for laughing your way  
into a journalism career

By Matt Welch

**M**ost successful journalists, when called upon to speak in front a group of aspiring young reporters, writers, and editors, tell them that, sadly, the glory days are long gone. There's no more gold in them thar hills. The very future of journalism—and along with it, democracy herself—is hanging by a thread.

"Welcome to a dying industry, J-school grads," bestselling author Barbara Ehrenreich, who once made \$10 a word for *Time* magazine, told Berkeley students in 2009. "You won't get rich, unless of course you develop a sideline in blackmail or bank robbery." Five years earlier at the same university, multimillionaire Ted Koppel sang the same song. "Don't get into it because of the money," the television star warned. "Don't get into because you think you get to be well-known."

"I am far less optimistic," *New Yorker* writer and Columbia Journalism School Dean Nicholas Lemann told graduates last year, "that journalists will have the economic means of producing journalism." Sounding somewhat more optimistic though no less defiant was

*Washington Post* publisher Katharine Weymouth, who told Medill students in 2009, “I have yet to meet a journalist who was in it for the money.” It should be pointed out that Weymouth’s millionaire maternal grandparents were both publishers of the *Washington Post*, and her millionaire uncle Donald remains the CEO.

Why do successful, rich people spend so much time telling you that you can’t make money the way they did, and that—anyways—you somehow shouldn’t want to? There are many plausible explanations, but I would focus your attention on one: journalists are generally unschooled in economics and history, particularly the economics and history of journalism itself. They are notorious about exempting themselves from the kind of merciless conflict-of-interest rules they otherwise enjoy foisting on politicians and academic researchers. In other words, they are locked into what I like to call the “A&P view of journalism.”

A&P was not some 19th-century railroad immortalized in the board game *Monopoly*; it was—as recently as the 1950s—the dominant supermarket chain in the United States, with a stunning 75-percent market share and 16,000 stores at its peak. It was the Wal-Mart of its day: omnipresent, unstoppable, permanent.

Nowadays, like so much of what seemed indelible in the “Organization Man 1950s”—Kodachrome and U.S. Steel, anyone?—A&P has retreated to comparative insignificance, with less than 400 stores in just seven states. Two months ago, the company filed for bankruptcy and was de-listed from the New York Stock Exchange. Such, as you know well, are the joys of creative destruction.

Well, imagine for a moment that the popular history of modern American supermarkets—the rise of upscale health-conscious outlets like Whole Foods, price-slashing monsters like Wal-Mart, online upstarts like Peapod.com—was chronicled not by financial report-

ers and retail academics but by life-long employees of A&P. Imagine that the people trying to document and interpret a revolution for you are the exact same people whose friends and colleagues are being sent to the guillotine. It is a conflict of interest so utterly foundational, so deterministic to the way people talk about the media industry that almost nobody even mentions it. Life looks a hell of a lot different from the perspective of a dinosaur slowly leaking power than it does to a fickle consumer happily, gobbling up innovation wherever it appears.

What does this have to do with figuring out how to orient your journalism career? A couple of things. First, know that much of what you are generally told about the media business is flat out wrong. You *can* get rich. The industry—or better stated, the vocation—is *not* dying, it's thriving; and despite every insider indication to the contrary, the journalism racket is one hell of a lot of fun. And understanding the contours of the market you're entering is the most important of seven basic steps to jumpstart your media career.

## 1) Become your own media reporter

Don't just scan Romenesko, Gawker, and Media Bistro for the latest gossip about the industry. Submit yourself to the rigor and humility of reporting and analyzing the media business and practice yourself in a far more sophisticated way than merely snickering at *The New York Times* or Glenn Beck. Understand what parts of the mediasphere are expanding, what parts are contracting, and why. Identify which activities—such as the bloviation of opinion—are being priced downward toward zero, and which ones (such as being able to shoot and edit video) are being better compensated every day. If you're thorough, you won't only have a much better grasp on your own job market, you'll also have plenty of story ideas—and

an attractively counter-intuitive point of view—that you can get people to pay for.

## 2) Create your own reality

The traditional route to a quality journalism job—grad school + internships + connections, then working your way up through progressively more impressive institutions— isn't dead yet, but it's greatly diminished. That's a marvelous opportunity for people who had been marginalized by the previous system—including ideologically—to make a name for themselves, by themselves. So: always be starting a blog, opening a Twitter account, making a YouTube channel that animates the most idiotic sentences from Thomas L. Friedman columns. Do *something* with all this glorious freedom in a way that can quickly showcase your talents and areas of specialty. If you know an obscure topic better than most people reporting on it, start a group blog dedicated to exactly that, and force those who are interested in the topic to deal with your existence. Putting up a public flare can send light into places you'd otherwise never think to look.

## 3) In a world where gatekeepers are dying out, master the skills gatekeepers valued

There are many young people who are entrepreneurial media-starters, engaging writers, technological whizzes...and yet they can't spell, have never heard of AP style, and wouldn't have any idea about writing a four-source story in pyramid style in a half-day's work. Yes, understanding the new is where most of your comparative value will probably lie, but mastering old-school writing/editing/reporting/comportment chops is an excellent way of differentiating yourself from peers. Exercising those skills is also one of the best methods for keeping your own ideology honest.

#### **4) Recognize that you don't know it all and that's ok**

Journalism is pretty much the world's best excuse for learning stuff you don't otherwise know about. But ideologically flavored journalism is often the world's worst excuse for reporting because the writers are working backward from a conclusion, tailoring facts to meet the argument. Any sound ideology will survive collisions with reality, and not every slice of truth will fit neatly into a philosophical narrative. The best journalism starts with enough humility to appreciate the value of a well-turned *fact* above all else. If you think you know it all—on any subject—in your 20s, you are not only almost certainly wrong (and irritatingly so to your superior), you are also closing off avenues for discovering a better story.

#### **5) Always be figuring out how to give your audience more power**

The overwhelming trend in all aspects of modern life is away from top-down Organization Man culture and toward the empowered, idiosyncratic, multiple-hyphenated individual. Consumers instinctively understand this; legacy gatekeepers of the type introduced at the beginning of this piece inherently do not. Always be on the lookout for increasing audience participation and even collaboration. Whenever possible, show your math. Chances are almost guaranteed that you have a more forward-looking set of references about this than your boss, so suggest to her or him ways to better democratize their product.

#### **6) Indulge your hobbies, learn foreign languages, and travel to exotic places**

When every consumer is a potential producer, journalistic competition can get pretty rough. You absolutely, positively need

to have unusual areas of expertise. Are you a Fantasy Baseball fanatic? Specialist in Hungarian folk dances? Maybe you have read every recent book about the Acadian-American experience? Find an excuse to make these passions public—writing in fan forums, starting a blog only 10 people read, whatever. You'll get to deepen your knowledge, meet like-minded weirdos, and create opportunities you can only guess at. One of the easiest ways to develop a strange specialty—and greatly broaden your mind—is to just up and light off for a different part of the world for a while, preferably mastering its language. Those who spent the last half-decade writing about Egyptian heavy metal are in heavy demand today.

## **7) Don't believe it when they say you can't get rich, but first learn how to live poor**

There are tens of thousands of American journalists making six-figure salaries, a shocking number of millionaires, and there's no reason to suspect their numbers are decreasing. The great disintermediation of journalism has made it easier than ever to identify and reward talent, and we're still talking about a multibillion-dollar industry, one whose flagship model—the newspaper—averaged 20-percent profit margins for nearly a half-century. All that said, nothing stifles youthful innovation and experimentation more than depending prematurely on a significant standard of living. And nothing burns out talented young journalists faster than the compromises they must endure by working a bad job to make their car payments. Learning how to live frugally while young greatly expands your opportunities, builds more of a cushion for doing stuff like working for little or no wage for a quality publication, and above all else it gives you the magical power of being able to say the word "no." When you don't need the money, you'll follow your journalis-

tic heart, and that's how you maintain passion for your craft.

This stuff is fun. At the heart of the rich gatekeeper's lament is a sour nostalgia for pecking orders and perks, for a Chinese Wall between audience and authority. It's profoundly unattractive. You are part of a great collaborative exercise in democratization, of chipping away at the concrete and replacing it with something new. Whether that lands you in the belly of the beast or locked with it in a cage match to the death, your can-do enthusiasm will prove decisive. Even as you transition from happy amateur to credentialed professional, don't let the bastards get you down, and don't ever let them tell you that the industry is dead.

*Matt Welch (matt.welch@reason.com) is Editor-in-Chief of Reason*



# Making old media's demise work for you:

## Opportunities and challenges of being a full-time freelancer

By Mollie Ziegler Hemingway

If you're thinking about a journalism career, you've probably heard all of the horrific stats about shrinking newspapers, reporters having to cover multiple beats, massive layoffs, and the like.

It's all true.

But what you need to remember is that the decentralization and downsizing of the news industry has benefits, too.

I picked one of the worst times possible to begin my journalism career. I'd wanted to make the jump for years but found the low pay to be a huge hurdle. When I lost my job a few months after September 11, the low pay was suddenly preferable to no pay. Unfortunately, the terrorist attacks had put a significant dent in the economy. Advertising budgets, always the first to be cut in a downturn, were small. Papers shrunk—or closed. I was competing with 20-year veterans for low-level journalism jobs.

Out of desperation, I overstated my Spanish skills to get a job as a receptionist at a bilingual trade publication covering the music

industry. Within a few weeks, I went from answering phones, delivering faxes, and making coffee to writing business briefs. My editor allowed me to write my first feature soon thereafter.

A few months after I started this job, I got an idea for a reported op-ed. The piece was personally important to me, and I wanted it to reach as big an audience as possible. *The Wall Street Journal* seemed like the perfect place to pitch it. It was well respected and had a large national circulation. I had no idea how crazy it was to pitch one's first freelance piece to such a prestigious paper. By the time it ran a few days later, I was completely hooked on a writing career.

My experience at the trade publication enabled me to get a job at a much larger publishing company. Officially, the company required a degree in journalism. My degree was in economics, but they made an exception.

My beat required me to cover government waste, fraud, and mismanagement. Despite my lack of journalism education, I managed to do pretty well. I chalk most of this up to my contrarian political views. Many of the folks on similar beats at other papers were big fans of a large, expansive government. I was not, so I could find stories about waste, fraud, and mismanagement more easily than they could.

While it was a tremendous grind, I loved being a daily beat reporter. There's no better experience for a writing career than having to cultivate sources, find stories, figure out your hook, and quickly draft copy—day after day after day.

After a couple of years of reporting, I asked some of the journalists I most admired for advice on what to do next. One of them, an editor at a major magazine, told me to pick an area of expertise and devote myself to it.

I had already started focusing all of my freelance work on

economics, baseball, and religion. Of these three, religion news was the area where there seemed to be the most opportunity. Few could write knowledgeably about religion, and editors were desperate for content. I could more easily pitch a news story or feature about religion than I could baseball. So, while I probably would have preferred to write about baseball or economics, the market encouraged me to focus on religion.

My mentor had explained to me the benefits of becoming a reliable source on a given topic. Rather than having to be in a constant pitch mode, if you keep producing stories on a given topic, producers and editors actually come to you much of the time. Since pitching is far and away the worst part of the writing process—unless you really enjoy being ignored or told “no” over and over and over again—that’s a huge plus.

Another benefit is that you can take the same reporting work and sell it over and over again. I hear this was much easier in the days before the internet when you could sell more-or-less the same story to multiple outlets. But it still works now. For instance, one of my freelance gigs involves writing for a blog that covers religion news. So if I write a few posts on, say, the influence of Hindu Nationalists on textbook battles in California, I can easily turn that into an op-ed or the basis for a feature-length piece for another publication. Sometimes I get lucky and editors will even approach me and ask me to write a piece based on some blog posts they’ve read.

Aside from topical reporting and commentary, my interest in broader issues also pays dividends. My longstanding interest in civil religion—the blending of politics, patriotism, and religion—means I can dash off blog posts and op-eds. But my past writings and extensive knowledge of the subject also mean I can write lengthier features for magazines or chapters for books.

And devoting yourself to a particular niche means you know earlier than most when a story is worth more attention or has a fresh hook that would interest a wider audience. If you dabble in too many areas, you risk being unable to cover any of the topics with much depth.

Like my initial decision to get into journalism, my decision to do freelance work full-time was also somewhat serendipitous. It was provoked by the birth of my first child. By the time she arrived, I'd figured out that I wanted to have more control over what I wrote, and I wanted to be as involved with raising her as possible. If I'd stayed at my newspaper job, I wouldn't have had time for any freelance work and I wouldn't have much time with my child.

I'd built up enough regular gigs, contracts, and contacts to make it work. Because I didn't have the burdens of my full-time job, I had more time to be creative and aggressive with my story pitches. Each additional story, op-ed, blog post, and fellowship led to other opportunities at more outlets. I got a column at a major magazine. I was asked to contribute to books and speak to groups throughout the country.

A writing career matches well with having a family in part because it's so flexible and allows for increased or decreased work. When my second child arrived, I was able to stagger my assignments so that I could ease back into work after her birth.

While my move to freelance work was motivated by family concerns, it coincided with major downsizing among newspapers and magazines. That created opportunities as well. Newspapers and magazines still need content even if they are struggling to pay benefits for full-time employees. That means that you can develop a relationship with a media outlet for regular content without having all the hassle of a full-time, 9-6 job. Such an arrangement isn't ideal

for everyone, but it works if you have benefits arranged through other mechanisms.

Being a full-time freelancer can also allow you more opportunities to travel and jump on assignments that come up suddenly. For example, I had always dreamed of covering a political convention. While I was employed full-time at media outlets, such a trip was difficult to justify. But as a freelancer, I was able to cover both national political conventions in 2008. My husband—also a writer—and I covered both 2008 conventions with our daughter in tow. We rigged childcare together almost perfectly, so that we could report and do radio and television interviews as needed. Because various media outlets have weak travel budgets, they couldn't afford to send as many reporters to the conventions as they would have liked. I was able to cover speeches, meetings, and protests and sell pieces to a variety of outlets to finance my trip.

Make no mistake: being a full-time freelance journalist is hard, and being a mother of young children to boot is especially trying at times. Challenges include conducting phone interviews with children underfoot, meticulous record-keeping for tax purposes, and the constant pressure of finding new gigs. However, the freedom I'm afforded and the job satisfaction more than makes up for the frustrations. While the troubles facing media have made a writing career challenging, they also provide opportunities and flexibility that were unavailable in the past.



# Practical tips to starting your journalism career

By Megan Ward

## Random tips for journalists

- Keep these things in your car at all times: a notebook, pens, business cards, sturdy shoes, a rain coat and a map (Map-Quest and GPS will get it wrong)
- Never be shy about saying, “I don’t understand”
- Never lie for your job
- Don’t ask, “Do you have any comments...” Instead say, “I’d like to know what you think about...”
- If someone asks you for a favor or a question you are uncomfortable with, just say, “I’ll check with my editor”
- Listen more than you talk

## Introduction

A career in journalism is a rewarding one offering meaningful work. As a journalist you have opportunities to inform, enlighten, entertain, and—sometimes—change lives. The job offers variety; each day is different. You have the chance to connect with different

people, learn new things every day and possess an understanding of what is happening in your community.

## 1) The first step: The internship

This is an industry that rewards strong, committed work with advancement. Getting there takes more than a journalism degree and references from professors. It takes experience. An internship is your ticket there. Just like most things in life, what you get out of it depends on what you put into it. An internship is an opportunity to learn skills, make connections, produce examples of your published work and find out if this is the right career for you.

### GETTING ONE

Many students may dream about interning at larger newspapers like *The Chicago Tribune* or *The Charlotte Observer*. There is great value to working in a large newsroom and making connections with journalists who have made it this far, but an internship at a large, metro paper in a big city may be difficult to obtain. Furthermore, with the prestige of interning at a large paper often goes clerical and research work.

Interns at smaller papers, however, often write front page stories their first week. A smaller staff can allow you to interact more closely with other staff members including copyeditors, photographers, and online editors. You will probably receive more attention at a smaller paper. Interns at a community paper often have more responsibilities and a wider range of coverage opportunities.

In May, newspaper editors may field dozens of phone calls and e-mails from young, aspiring journalists searching for a summer internship. Get ahead of them. Send an e-mail in the winter. Give the dates you will be available to work and the times. Tell the editor

what you are willing to do.

One of the things you should be willing to do is write stories, include a list of at least 10 story ideas. Make sure those ideas are all local. Explore the paper's website, and read through the calendars in the newspaper from church events to art classes and even the classifieds to find local story ideas. Search community websites, such as the chamber of commerce, the county's school system and more. In doing this, you will learn about the community and find story ideas.

Your well-researched story list will show an editor what you can offer the paper. Follow up with a phone call after you send the email. If you don't hear back immediately, try again. Persistence pays off, but don't go to the point of harassment. If you haven't heard back after leaving a few messages and emails, move on to another newspaper.

## **CONGRATS YOU'RE AN INTERN. NOW WHAT? BE AN ASSET**

Interns frequently create more work for editors—sometimes, more work than they are worth.

Interns may have little or no knowledge of AP style. Their copy may be sloppy and filled with grammatical errors and inaccuracies. Their writing may read more like a college term paper than the clear, straightforward style of newspaper writing.

With those interns, the editor has to take time out of his or her day to find something for the intern to do. Editors hate those interns.

Don't be one of *those* interns. Learn AP style. Read newspapers—lots of them—every single day and not just *The New York Times*, but your hometown paper as well. Pay attention to the language used in the articles, the length of the articles and the sources in the stories. Make sure to read a variety of stories and not just national news. Read those stories about the church group crocheting blankets for the poor, the city budget, and fatal car crashes.

Avoid inaccuracies at all costs. One of the most common and easily avoidable mistakes is misspelling someone's name. Always ask. Ask Bob Smith to spell his name. An editor may forgive you for misspelling a person's name, but it will never be forgotten. After interviewing a source, go over the facts to make sure they are accurate. Don't offer to send the story to a source before it's published. Many papers have policies against this. Check with an editor. Usually, a source will rethink what he said and will want to revise until your piece reads like a press release.

Learn how to post your stories on the newspaper's website. Shoot video and photos if possible. Most newspapers now see themselves as content gatherers and producers and concentrate on their website as much as on their print product. Find out what the paper is doing on its website and social media. Volunteer to help with those efforts. These skills will help you land a job later.

Preparation will give you a stronger knowledge of the community you are covering. A dedicated commitment to accuracy and openness to expanding your multimedia skills shows the editor you are worth the extra work.

## **GET THE MOST OUT OF YOUR INTERNSHIP**

Working with seasoned professionals in the industry will be invaluable as you build your experience. Forming connections and building relationships will help you learn from these professionals. They will care more about you when they see your dedication to learning and willingness to work in the newsroom.

## **LEARN FROM OTHERS**

### ***Reporters***

Seek out the best, most productive reporters in the newsroom.

Listen when they interview someone on the phone. Pay attention to their tones, what questions they ask, and how they manage their time. Request to go with them on an assignment. Ask questions.

### ***Newsroom staff***

Get to know the photographers, the webmaster, copyeditors, page designers and other newsroom staff. These people often have long careers in journalism and possess great knowledge about the industry. They offer a different perspective from reporters and editors. Ask them questions about their job. It is important to understand what others do in a newsroom.

### ***Editors***

During your internship, ask your editor or city editor how you're progressing and what you need to work on to improve your reporting and writing. Take notes about what she or he says and heed the advice.

Before your internship comes to an end, ask for another meeting with the editor to get some feedback on your overall performance. You get a lot of feedback as a student, but in the workforce you will need to seek it to receive it. Find out exactly what you are good at and what you need to improve. Again, take notes. The praise will give you talking points down the road for job interviews. "During my internship, my editor told me my copy was clean and my multimedia skills were impressive."

Concentrate on improving in the areas you receive criticism. If you are told you are a slow writer, work on that. Research ways to improve your speed.

## **DIVERSIFY AND SAVE**

Write as much as possible during your internship on a variety

of topics. A diverse portfolio of clips will help when you start your job search.

Keep a log of your story links in one place so you can send these as clips. Many reporters simply attach their links in their resume. This is fine, but keep paper copies in case the links become inactive on the website. You may also want to scan the stories and save them as pdfs to send electronically when applying for a job.

## **MAINTAIN GOOD RELATIONS**

Before you leave, ask the editor and other staff you worked with, including reporters and photographers, if you can use them as professional references. After you leave, send thank you letters to the editors and other staff you worked with. Let them know you appreciate the time and attention they gave you. It's professional and courteous. It may also help them remember you fondly when they get that call from an editor checking your references.

## **2) The second step: The first job**

### **LANDING ONE**

You should use many of the steps you used in getting an internship for landing your first job. Research the newspapers where you are interested in working. Do more than plug in the newspaper's name in your cover letter. Write about specific projects the paper has produced, some of their community service projects, and regular features of the paper that impress you.

Then, quickly move on to what you will bring to the paper. If you have had an internship, tell what you accomplished there. List the software you have worked with and your computer skills. Give your clips. (Most editors and HR managers want clips sent electronically

so make sure those links are still live before you send them.)

If the paper offers you an interview, you need to do more research. Read the paper for several days. Make sure to read that day's paper cover to cover. If you get a chance to meet the lifestyles editor, mention how much you enjoyed the package on summer gardening or dog training.

Come to the interview with a list of questions that showcase your interest in the work. Ask about a typical day at the paper, the culture in the newsroom, the connection between the paper and the community and government leaders, and projects about which the editor is particularly proud.

The next day, send a thank you note, and wait for an offer before asking about the 401k or vacation time and salary.

## **MANAGE YOUR BEAT**

Being a good reporter means more than showing up at meetings or crime scenes. It means getting to know people and gaining their trust enough so they will tell you information. This trust comes from continual contact with your sources.

Cultivating good sources is not about being liked; it's about being respected and trusted to get the information right. The first step to establishing this trust is after the first interview and story with that source. Call him or her and ask his or her thoughts about the story you wrote. Too often a source will spend time with a reporter and won't hear from her or him for months until that reporter wants another story. Checking back with the source shows you care about accuracy. This fosters trust.

This is especially important because in your career, you will write about things that will embarrass a source or illustrate a source's failing. Accurate and responsible reporting will enable you to write

about the bad stuff and still have that person respect you.

Check regularly with a list of sources. Call them at least once a week and find out what's happening. Keep a list of your contacts. Every time you get a new number, log it, especially cell phone numbers. Make sure everyone has yours.

## **GET OUT AND GET CONNECTED**

Don't do your reporting by phone. You will get more information and connect more by interviewing someone in their office or home. Reporters who do most of their reporting by phone are lazy. Their stories are bland and lack details. Getting out of the newsroom will make you a stronger reporter with vivid and compelling stories.

Getting out of the newsroom extends to your social life as well. A journalist who simply goes to work and then home to watch Netflix will not be a good journalist. A good journalist is connected to the community. Join a club. Volunteer on a board; be a mentor. If you're religious, join a local church. Not are only such interactions the source of stories, but you will be a happier and better journalist with a stronger connection with people in the community about which you are reporting.

## **BECOME A GOOD PLANNER**

One of the best perks of being a journalist is having control of how you spend your days. But it's only a perk if you know how to plan. Never come to work without knowing what you will do that day. Make a weekly story budget and follow it. The assignment editor, who usually doesn't get out of the office much, will have a list of needed stories, stories about church fundraisers, blood drives, and retirements—in other words, boring assignments. Those without a

plan that day will be sure to get those.

Knowing your beat, knowing what's happening in the community, and having a plan are the best ways to give you control over how you spend your days, and the best ways to further your career. Clips filled with obituaries and town council meetings will not impress editors at larger papers.

## **TAKE ON PROJECTS**

You're compiling a diverse portfolio of clips, but what you really need are large projects. These projects are your calling card when you knock on the doors of larger papers. A project could become a series and ultimately a press award, which improves a resume and turns the heads of editors at larger papers. A strong project shows you are capable of producing more than coverage of events and news. They show you are an enterprising reporter who can develop larger, meaningful pieces.

A project is a whole package deal. You will need a strong multimedia component, info graphics and striking photos to complement your reporting. So first, find a topic that is meaningful to you. Then collaborate with an editor, the online editor, photographers, and graphic artist about your project.

Remember you're going to have to juggle a large project while still managing a beat. So plan. Make an outline for your project with your own deadlines of what you want to accomplish. Share it with your editor. Include your work planned in your weekly work budget. Let editors know what you are working on when.

When it comes to working on the project, keep a separate notebook for your project work. Don't mix it in with your notes on city council meetings. Write after every interview. If you put it off, you will forget valuable information, details, and images for the story.

## **CONTINUE GROWING**

Embrace change in your career. If an editor wants to change your beat, go for it. This helps you become a diverse, enterprising journalist who is capable of more than just being good at a specific beat. It stretches your comfort level, challenges you to cultivate a different group of sources and teaches you more. It helps you grow as a journalist.

A growing journalist should also do more than just write stories. When covering breaking news, post updates on the website throughout the day. Learn to tweet, blog and use other social media in your reporting. If you aren't doing this, know that plenty of others are.

Another thing that helps you grow as a journalist is avoiding gossip. Newsrooms are often infested with a few gossips. Don't be one of them. Don't get hung up on what others aren't doing. You wrote 10 stories last week and they wrote three. Well, guess where they will be in five years? Where will you be? Besides, it's not your problem; it's the editor's.

## **KEEP AN EYE ON THE FUTURE**

Network. Get to know leaders in the industry. Talk to journalism professors at universities in your state. Many editors call them looking for the names of good reporters.

Go to lots of seminars like the ones your state's press association holds for journalists throughout the year. If your paper won't send you, take the days off and pay for the seminars yourself. They are usually inexpensive, provide valuable training, and are a great place to meet leaders from other area papers. Exchange business cards. Befriend a reporter there and keep in contact.

Interested in working for some other papers? Send them your

resume and clips—even if they are not advertising a position. Follow up with a phone call. You never know when they will have an opening, and an editor will remember that persistent reporter who sends a resume every six months with updated clips.

Be willing to move to another newspaper that is smaller than your dream job. If it is a larger operation with a larger circulation than your current one, it is often an improvement and may bring you closer to your goal paper.

## **EXIT GRACEFULLY**

When leaving your first paper, exit gracefully. Often no matter the dedication and good work you have done, the memory of you there will be how you left. Speak positively of the paper and the people you worked with. Express your gratitude for your time there.

Being a journalist is an important job. As journalists we can change lives and change a community. It's also rewarding. In few other jobs do you have such control over how you spend your days and so many opportunities to learn new things. Our work is an honor to have and a great responsibility. Treat it as such and the rewards can be endless.

*Megan Ward (mward@shelbystar.com) is the editor of The Star in Shelby, N.C.*



# The first voice heard in the morning:

## Four steps for starting a career in radio journalism

By Brian DeNeve

**R**adio news on AM/FM commercial stations is a tough gig. It is not a 9 to 5 job. You will have to come in at odd hours, weekends, overnight, etc. Get used to it. After all, radio prime time is the morning drive, a window generally starting at 5 a.m. When the rest of the world is rolling out of bed, brushing teeth, and making coffee, you have to be possibly the first voice heard in the morning.

Tough as being a radio journalist can be, it can be even tougher if you don't make the right choices or have unrealistic expectations. Radio is not an industry of fame or fortune, rather one of little pay and an increasing workload. However, just because you have to "pay your dues" does not mean you should waste time in positions of little pay or upward mobility. The following advice will help you navigate the minefield of what is a volatile, fading business.

### 1) Get an internship

If you are considering a news radio career, get an internship. It will give you real-world experience and networking opportunities,

but most importantly it will help you decide whether you'd even want to work in the biz.

A paid internship is a plus, but don't expect one. It's not your goal anyway. Your goal is to step out the ivory tower and into the thick of it.

If all you have is a small-town radio station nearby, don't worry. It's a place to start. Even if the station does not have a news room, much less a news reporter on staff, you should spend some time there. At the very least, it will give you real exposure to the inner workings of a station.

If you want to become a radio journalist, though, don't spend too much time there. Ideally, you want to be around a strong news operation. If one is not near where you live, this may require some travel and cost depending on your situation. An inside word is the best way to find out which news rooms are decent and which are not. Networking through groups like the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) or states' news broadcasters associations can help you gain insight. Or perhaps you could see the operation for yourself by volunteering as a job shadow, an approach that may also help you get your foot in the door for an internship later.

Surprisingly, a polished on-air product is not an indication of that station's news room. It's possible the newscaster is simply reading wire copy developed by another source. It's also very common for news hubs to provide "local" information for other radio stations. Although it sounds like the anchor is reporting on local politics, he or she is actually "beamed in" from hundreds of miles away. So be resourceful and cut through the smoke and mirrors.

As far as what to look for, a strong news operation normally involves more than one person. Coverage need not be strictly public affairs, but the operation should attempt to follow important issues.

Using “local” anchors from far away is very common now, but if the station is using more than 50 percent of its voices that way, it’s probably not worth wasting your time there.

Once you figure out where you want to work, you need to figure out who hires the interns. If there is no contact info for an internship on the organization’s website, simply call and find out who handles them. If you leave a message with that person and don’t hear back, call him or her again until you get through. If you find yourself apprehensive about making multiple phone calls to the same person, you might want to consider a career outside of journalism.

If you land the interview, be enthusiastic, professional, and humble. There is a multitude of books on giving a great interview, and the principles apply the same when dealing with radio management.

If you pass the interview and get in the door, be a friendly intern. If you don’t know someone there, introduce yourself. You are in other people’s territory; they are not mandated to welcome you. Be willing to learn. Don’t spend the day playing with your smart phone. Focus. Be prompt.

Save your scripts, airchecks, newscasts, etc. This applies whether you are in school, an internship, or a first job. The more material you have, the better off you are when putting together a resume tape for that next step, like a bigger media market and theoretically more money. It also helps to have a few quality pieces that you could enter into contests. Winning them is even better.

With today’s few jobs in the field, the internship probably won’t lead to a full-time job at that station. Instead, take what you’ve learned, and if you have some time left in school, use it as a method of gauging your next step.

Also, keep in touch with your former colleagues and supervisors. They could turn out to be the friend you need when you are

looking for that first real gig. As in every other profession, networking is essential. If you haven't attended some gatherings for groups like SPJ or your state's news broadcasters association, get on that right away. Most of these groups have websites with decent job banks, too.

These groups will be helpful in finding mentors, a key in radio journalism. Unlike your counterparts in TV and newsprint, there may be few chances for mentoring in your first radio news job. You could be hired as a News Director for a small-market station, meaning you are the only person doing news at that facility. In these cases, who will provide guidance on stories? Who will critique you on your abilities?

## 2) Learn on the job

Journalism is best learned on the job, so I suggest majoring in something outside of the journalism, broadcasting, or communication pipeline. I have a BA in broadcasting and learned a great deal about the sociological effects of media on certain groups, but in retrospect a broadcast minor would have been adequate to develop the basic skills. Having another degree can actually enhance your abilities as a reporter. For example, a political science major would enhance your public affairs reporting, an economics major could help your business coverage or an English major would give you stronger writing skills.

Your skills as a newscaster, whether you are in school or ready for retirement, center on delivery (anchoring) and production (writing and use of sound). Interviewing and other tasks are important, but delivery and production are the vital skills.

A basic-level anchor should be able to read a newspaper article start to finish with only minimal flubbing. For practice, spend a

half-hour a day reading some form of news copy, then listen back to your delivery. You can even use newsprint, but you might want to stay away from stuff like *The New York Times*. Broadcast copy is never that cerebral.

The best way to develop a good ear for production is to listen to good work—like NPR’s use of natural sound—then incorporate the ideas into your pieces. Don’t get too caught up in the various audio software programs. They will change over time. Master one or two programs now, and use that mastery as a springboard. Writing should be conversational. Author Mervin Block is a good resource for this.

### **3) Develop other media skills**

Although you are an aspiring radio journalist, radio is only one format to convey your information. Blogging and other social media are increasingly necessary aspects of being a modern reporter. Some of the better radio news groups are doing video and photography along with long-form text for web stories. If you don’t know how to take a good photo or write a decent newsprint-style article, learn how. These skills will help you not just in doing the job, but also in shaping your personal brand as a reporter which is similar to branding any product. Companies use a multitude of platforms to develop a trusted image for consumers. Likewise, you should use multimedia to develop trusted news coverage for consumers of information.

### **4) Be a jack-of-all-trades**

Some people right out of college go to work full-time in a major market. However, don’t be surprised if your first job opportunity is either a part-time or hybrid position. Unfortunately, the days of a

full-time radio reporter are all but gone in smaller media markets. In addition to working in the news room, you will probably have to spend some time doing traffic reports, taking care of administrative work, or helping produce advertising spots.

If you would prefer spending most of your time on-air, then work toward being a diverse broadcaster. The ability to do play-by-play for high school sports or to double as a music DJ is also an advantage as companies look to cut staffing. A single-task employee in radio is dispensable. It is in your best interest to add multiple tiers of value to your employer. Hopefully, you can move past this jack-of-all-trades and get a full time news gig, but it may take a bit of time.

## Why do it?

So with little pay, weird hours, and the realization that you will most definitely be fired at some point, why do radio news? First, you are the master of your own destiny. You don't need to work for a great radio station to be a great reporter. You may be doing newscasts on a coffee-stained soundboard that is 40 years old. Who cares? If you have a recorder and a way to edit the sound, you're set.

Second, it's a lot of fun. Despite being an ever-shrinking product, radio news continues to be a major element in the public discourse. It's an information conduit that can touch people when they least expect it. You're letting the mother picking up her kids from school, the guy at the factory or the person cleaning their house what's going as they're going about their day. Internet, TV or print news cannot claim this distinction.

# Fundamentals of freelancing:

## Approaching writing as a business

By Lene Johansen

**F**reelance writing can be a rewarding career that brings you into contact with inspiring people who love what they do and love sharing it with the world. It can give you a measure of control over your own time, but it can also bring nail-biter months where you won't be able to pay your bills.

If your goal is to become a successful freelance writer, you have to approach writing as a business. You have to think about money, time, networking, and the nuts and bolts of the job. Here are some tips on how to do that.

### 1) Money, Money, Money!

Do the math: There are 40 hours in a workweek and 52 weeks in a year. Thus, a work year without vacation time is 2080 hours. But people don't work continually. Consulting firms estimate that consultants can bill only 70% of their time as they spend 30% on administrative tasks and vacation. Multiply 2080 by .70, and you get 1456 hours of billable work time in a year. Someone has to pay you

for those hours.

How much do they have to pay you? Add up monthly expenses such as rent, utilities, food, insurance, student loans, credit-card payments, administrative costs (domains, ISP, business cards and other business expenses), etc. Include how much you want to save and the amount of play money you'd like to have. The result: what you need to make per year.

This metric should help you prioritize your time on money-making activities. If you are falling behind on this metric, you must ask yourself if you are spending your time correctly. If you need to be paid \$30 an hour and you get \$100 for a story, you should be able to complete the story and all related tasks in about 3 hours.

## 2) Taking care of business

In addition to your sales, you also have to make sure that the money gets into your account. Invoice every project in a timely manner. If you don't get paid on time, call the customer and ask when you can expect the money. It takes two to three months on average to get paid. The key is to build up enough incoming revenue streams to have a steady cash flow even if a client or two pays late.

Giving up your day job and joining the ranks of the self-employed increases the probability that the IRS will audit you. So it is vital you keep track of all your sales and all your expenses. The easiest way to do this is to grab 12 big manila envelopes. Write down the current month and year on the envelope, and put all your receipts, copies of payment stubs, and invoices for that month in the envelope. At the end of the month, enter all the receipts into a spreadsheet: expenses in one column, income in another, and type of expense in the third column.

You can deduct all expenses related to your business, includ-

ing travel, food, books, magazines, lodging, equipment, supplies, phone and internet services—pretty much anything you use in your day-to-day work. At the end of the year, take your envelopes, your spreadsheets, and go see an accountant for tax preparation. The accountant will know how to deduct expenses, such as home offices, and amortizable expenses such as office furniture and computers. Be prepared; keep those envelopes in archive boxes. There is no statute of limitations if the IRS accuses you of filing a fraudulent return.

### **3) Practice makes perfect**

Good writers write a lot. Set a daily word count goal and track how many days you actually meet that goal. The world is full of distractions: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, news feeds, friends who want to hang out because they think you don't work. Adhering to a daily word count is one way to keep you focused on earning a living.

### **4) To market, to market**

To get published, you have to market yourself. The three most important ways to do this are pitching your stories to editors, networking with editors, and building up a good readership circle online.

Pitching is the technical term for approaching an editor with a story or a story idea that he or she might like to purchase. Email a pitch or a story, or pick up the phone. Your pitch needs to answer the three questions.

#### **1. WHAT IS THE STORY ABOUT?**

The answer should be a succinct explanation about the story's topic. If you need more than a couple of sentences, you need to spend some more time refining the concept.

## **2. WHO ARE THE MAIN SOURCES AND WHY ARE YOU ABLE TO TALK TO THEM?**

Whether you are writing essays, reports, or opinion pieces, you need sources. Editors need to know who the main sources are, how they are relevant to the story, and how you will get the sources to talk to you. Existing relationships with sources, a history of writing on a topic, an acceptance from the source's PR representative, or credentials to the event at which the source will speak will help your case, but the best argument is if the main sources have agreed to talk.

So contact the sources before your pitch the editor. Tell them that you are working on a story and where you intend to pitch it, making it very clear that no publication has accepted this story yet. Then you can tell the editor that the sources are ready to talk to you.

## **3. WHY ARE YOU THE PERSON TO WRITE THIS STORY?**

Tell the editor why you are the best writer for this story by listing your notable previous publications, your expertise on the topic and other pertinent information.

## **5) Where to pitch it**

You have a great idea and a pitch letter, but no recipient. It's time for some market research.

First, ask yourself whether any publication you read might be interested in the story. If you are interested enough to write about it, you probably read about it regularly. Start by researching those publications, then pan out to identify other publications in that market.

When it comes to finding whom you should pitch, most paper publications have a masthead somewhere in the first few pages.

Online publications are a bit trickier, but with practice, you should be able to dig up staff lists and phone numbers. Services, such as Writer's Market, give you access to databases that tell you what the publications are about, who to pitch, and how much publications pay for freelance assignments.

When it comes to making the pitch, though, Writer's Market will not replace getting to know the publication. Take time to look at the magazine or website. Search through its online archives to learn what the publication has published on your story topic. Staff reporters go through the archives before pitching a story to the editor. You should, too.

When in doubt, call the publication. Your side of the conversation should go something like this: "My name is Lene Johansen, and I am working on a story about reading candidates' body language during the presidential debates next month. To whom should I talk about this story?"

If there are publications in which you would love to get published—both for your self-esteem and your resume—get their publishing calendar, the tool that the advertising department of a publication uses to sell ads. Basically a list of future issues and their themes, the publishing calendar helps the advertising department sell the advertisements that fund the paper. It can help you find topics for stories that could get into those issues.

The editorial calendar could also help you dig up pertinent story ideas. *Big Builder* magazine is doing a special issue on city planning. You recently saw a research article by a scientist modeling climate patterns caused by urban landscapes. An interview with that scientist may be the pitch that gets your foot in the door.

The editorial calendar is usually found inside the Media Kit on the publication web site. Media Bistro actually publishes editorial

## Tip

The IRS has several handy booklets that give you basic information about business expenses and what you can legitimately claim. Read them, talk to your accountant, and **KEEP ALL YOUR RECORDS!** You might also want to receive your bills and bank statements on paper as many companies will charge you to get you copies.

calendars for a range of big publications, but this information is hidden behind Media Bistro's membership pay wall. Sometimes, it is just as easy to find it online or even call the magazine and ask if they can email one to you.

Some publications do not have editorial calendars because the cycles of Congress, a particular industry, or some other entity drive their calendars. For those publications, it is best to follow the news in the beat. You will soon pick up the cycle. There may also be relevant calendars, such as the congressional calendar, FEC filing cycles, and trade conferences. The key is to get to know the beat by digging through back stories—if you haven't already been following coverage.

All this pitching and market research business is much easier if you actually know the editor. Having a personal connection with you makes an editor more inclined to listen to you. You don't have to have babysat the editor's kids. All you need to have done is met and exchanged business cards at an event or even struck up a conversation on Twitter. I have even used the line, "I ran into Joe Blow at this event. He suggested I get in touch with you to chat about writing for you."

I also make a point of sending a letter of introduction to four new editors per month. This email will include a brief introduction of who I am, a couple of story ideas, and two to four clips that might be relevant for this editor. These clips should show your range and be different types of stories, such as a hard news story, a feature, and an obituary.

## 6) Final product

Your editor will expect you to know some newsroom basics, even if you have never set foot in a newsroom. I will cover some of the basics in this section, but I recommend that you try to get some experience at your college paper and through IHS internships and other opportunities.

## 7) Format

Copy is always turned in as plain text without any formatting. “Pretty” fonts, different sizes for headlines, and italicized introductory paragraphs are a nightmare for the copydesk that must remove those flourishes before putting the piece into the content management system (CMS).

Never use the Tab key to indent as the copy desk must remove each one of those tabs. My manuscript template is set up so that the first line of each paragraph is indented. Do this using the paragraph settings in your word processor. This setting is the same as what is used by the CMS in most newsrooms, so your text will paste neatly into the system and eliminate copydesk nightmares. Avoid an empty white line to indicate a new paragraph: each one of those extra line changes must be removed by the copydesk.

You will never write your own headlines, so don’t waste your time by doing it. The editors on the copydesk are likely to be much

## Tip

Pick up the phone and call people. We are the digital generation with our emails, text messages, chats, and social networks, but at the end of the day there are many jobs you can't do without picking up the phone. Yes, it is scary. But the people on the other end are regular people, not brain-eating zombies, bill collectors, or your mom, and you are helping them by spreading the word about their passions or by filling a magazine with compelling content. Think about it as doing them a favor and it will be much harder to come up with excuses to not call.

better at it than you are. The only magazine that has ever asked me to write headlines is the Columbia Journalism Review, and it still changed them.

I will sometimes write subheads when I do really long stories, fully expecting those to be changed by the copydesk. Don't indicate a subhead by making the text bold, bigger font, or anything silly like that. Professionals write "SUBHEAD:" in all caps at the beginning of the line, followed by proposed title.

The next line should start with "TEXT:" with the copy starting on the same line directly thereafter. On some big story packets, you will write pullout boxes with relevant information. These should be at the end of the document and tagged with "PULLOUT:" and the text starting on the same line directly thereafter.

Turn in your document in plain text, usually as an attachment in a commonly used document format. These document formats include .txt, .rtf, and doc. Do not use .docx format or any other kind of document extension that makes it hard for the editor to open

and read your story. If you have Office 2010, save your document in the 2007 format. Some editors don't even want attachments but the copy pasted into the body of an email. Send your emails in plain text, not html, and no "cute" backgrounds. Attachments are the most common in my experience. The editors that prefer the text in the email will most likely tell you this.

## 8) Edit

Impeccable editing will make both copyeditors and editors love you, while texts full of spelling and grammar errors can make them reject any other stories you pitch. Use your word processor's spell check religiously. I have my word processor set to check for grammar AND STYLE. I have all the style options set. If you do this in a program like Word, the program will help you comply with guidelines from Elements of Style, which is a great resource on how to write more clearly.

Ask your word processor to provide readability statistics at the end of the grammar and spell check. In most cases, you want your readability to be around sixth to eighth grade.

Don't use a complicated word when a simpler one will do. It is a great way to lose a reader—and not get another assignment. I also read all my stories aloud to myself during the proofreading phase. It helps me identify awkward sentences and other mistakes.

You probably encountered style guides during your years in college. The style guide of choice for news people is AP Style. Buy the book, read it, and test yourself in those skills. Many newsrooms have their own internal style guides as well. Ask for them if you start working for the same publication a lot.

Spare yourself the shame of being publicly corrected: Fact check your work. Your editor will appreciate your thoroughness

and be inclined to trust your accuracy in the future.

Use the fact checking process to build trust with your sources and your editors. Send your sources an email including the quotes you used and the facts they gave to help catch any errors.

Don't send sources the entire story. They should not get an opportunity to rewrite the story or change quotes and facts that are awkward for them. Keep good notes and any sound recordings in case you have to discuss backtracking sources with your editor. Some people will stir up a stink. At the end of the story, include name and contact information for each of your human sources and URLs and references for nonhuman ones.

## 9) Socialize

People in regular jobs have an instant network of people from their industry every morning when they walk into work. Such a network is invaluable. It keeps you informed about trends and new technology and gives you sounding boards for issues you are pondering.

As a freelance journalist, you have to build your own network. You can start in cyberspace. There are some helpful freelancing blogs out there such as The Renegade Writer and the Well-Fed Writer. The Missouri School of Journalism has a student blog on mobile journalism tools where they test gizmos and gadgets of all stripes. Poynter regularly does live web chats on specific issues and has tons of other information about the news business as well.

Online groups are a good start, but they won't replace actual human contact. Groups like American Independent Writers and American Society of Journalists and Authors offer health care plans, companionship, and industry news. Various types of journalists have their own groups, such as National Association of Science Writers and Society of American Business Editors and Writers that offer skill

development and community. Put aside money to join groups such as these and go to their conferences and events. You will find new friends and endless amounts of advice and inspiration.

## 10) Accept mistakes

Despite all the attempts to professionalize it, journalism is a skill. You learn by doing. You will make mistakes. Everyone does. Just apologize and try again. Writing about topics you know and about which you care are the keys to a successful career as a freelance journalist. Build your freelancing career on your persistent passion, and you will be successful.

*I can be reached via Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/lenejohansen>), email: [lj@lenejohansen.com](mailto:lj@lenejohansen.com) ([lj@lenejohansen.com](mailto:lj@lenejohansen.com)), and Twitter [@lenejohansen](http://twitter.com/lenejohansen) (<http://twitter.com/lenejohansen>).*



# Using New Media to Jump Start Your Career

By Abigail Alger

**T**he Internet gives you the power to publish content globally and instantaneously for free. There are no gatekeepers, no distributors, and no editors. If you are a journalist at the beginning of your career, it's an extraordinary opportunity. You don't need a publisher; you can publish and promote yourself.

With free and low-cost online tools, you can create a digital portfolio, distribute your writing to interested people, and build your own audience. In the modern media, ad revenue is increasingly generated per (web) pageview—not per print issue. That means that the more people who follow your work online, the more attractive you become to potential employers.

## 1) Purpose of an online presence

A good online presence should establish three things: your “brand,” your expertise, and your connections.

Your brand is how you want others to perceive you. Think of your brand as the short description people should associate with

you, like “a hard-hitting investigative reporter” or “an insightful domestic-policy commentator.”

Your expertise is what you know, of course. More importantly, it’s the reason people pay attention to you. There’s no shortage of online content—particularly content about politics. Therefore, people must believe your work is especially well-informed and/or well-communicated before they will become consistent followers of it and you.

Your connections are the people to whom you distribute content online. They are blog readers, Twitter followers, and Facebook fans. They are people interested in your work because they like your brand and respect your expertise. Your connections also can be your marketing team as they recommend your work to their social networks by email, a Facebook “like,” or a link on Twitter.

## 2) Home base and outposts

An online presence encompasses the broad array of available web platforms: websites, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites. With these tools, you—and your writing—can be in multiple places at once. Online, publishing opportunities are almost limitless, which is why at times, you might also find them overwhelming.

But there’s a simple way for you to think about how to present a cohesive online presence. Divide your online presence into a home base (a website) and outposts (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and other places you choose to promote your writing).<sup>1</sup> Your home base contains all the important information about you: writing you self-published online, writing featured in print or web publications, and your background. Your outposts are where you promote your work and build connections with interested people to convert them

into readers. Your outposts constantly direct people back to your home base.

### 3) Building home base: Your website

Your website should tell a visitor everything you wish him or her to know about you: who you are, what you write about, and why he or she should pay attention to you. Your website should then offer a supportive visitor a way to keep in touch with you, whether with a contact form, an option to receive email updates from you, and/or links to your online outposts.

At minimum, your website should include:

- your biography;
- your blog (if you have time to update it regularly);
- an archive of and links to your published works;
- your contact information; and
- links to your online outposts.

Keeping site content fresh will be important to your success. Visitors will quickly leave an outdated site, and they are highly unlikely to return. Update your site regularly—at the barest minimum, once every two week—with links to your latest writing or updates on your career. You can also use simple web plug-ins to display your latest Twitter updates, which will make your site seem fresh and therefore of interest to a visitor.

Blogging platforms like WordPress (wordpress.com) or Blogger (blogger.com) offer simple, effective, and free websites even if you don't plan to have a blog. There's no cost or technical knowledge required; you simply create an account, manage your site, and add content using your web browser.

The drawbacks of this method are that you will have limited customization options and that the site will have a lengthy URL (e.g.,

yourname.wordpress.com), which makes it tedious for readers to find you online. However, for less than \$20 per year, you can buy a custom domain (e.g., yourname.com) that will forward users seamlessly to your free site.

For less than \$100 per year, you can buy a custom domain name and web hosting for your own website. Hosting your own site gives you more flexibility, customization, and control. You don't need technical knowledge to do this either. If your web expertise is limited, upload and install WordPress (wordpress.org), which you can do with a single click with many major web hosting companies.

You can use site analytics tools to learn how people are interacting with that content and, hence, with you. Site analytic information is free marketing research, so review it regularly.

Site analytic tools will tell you how many people visit your site, what they read on your site, and how they found your site—from other website links or from search engine results. Depending on how you build your website, you can access simple analytics in a user dashboard (as with WordPress.com accounts). You can also use Google Analytics (google.com/analytics) for a more comprehensive, in-depth report.

#### **4) Social media outpost: Facebook**

Once you build your home base, you can start using the outposts. Let's start with Facebook. Because Facebook encourages people to self-identify as devoted fans of brands, groups, and ideas, it's an easy place for you to begin sharing your writing with people likely to be interested in it.

You can promote your writing to your network on Facebook through your personal profile. It's easy to begin: you're promoting your work to friends and family, so you're likely to find supportive

responses. However, your personal network may not be the intended audience for your piece, and perhaps more importantly, you may not want to mix your personal and professional lives in this way.

You may then choose to start a Facebook fan page devoted to your writing career. At first, it will be difficult to build an audience. Be sure to add a “like box,” a simple Facebook plug-in, to your home base to allow visitors to “like” your page with a single click. You may also invite select Facebook friends to become a fan of your page. Choose Facebook friends who will be interested in your writing—not just friends who are interested in supporting you as their friend or family member.

On a Facebook fan page, just as on your home base, providing new content on a regular basis is essential for your success. Post updates to your fan page at least once per week or your Facebook community will grow stagnant. It will give a poor impression to those who would like to become fans of your career in the future.

How do you get your content out to different audiences on Facebook? It’s quite simple. Say you’ve written a piece about a university and you want to distribute it to an interested audience. First, like the university’s Facebook page, then type @University Name in your wall post that links to your story. Facebook will then link your post automatically to the fan page of the university. Some fan pages display wall posts like yours on their fan page wall for everyone to see; others will relegate those posts to a special tab labeled “Most Recent.” But regardless of the end destination, you will still have distributed your article to a wider, but targeted audience.

When you share links to your writing on Facebook, be sure to use all customization options. With just a click, you can change the headline, the preview text, and the image that displays with the link to your content. That means you can fashion your link to have a

short, interesting headline, interesting “teaser” preview text, and an eye-catching photograph.

You can also give users the option to share your Facebook content. If you have some technical knowledge, embed a Facebook “like” button in your web content by copying and pasting code from Facebook (see <http://developer.facebook.com>). If not, you can find free plug-ins for popular blogging platforms that will add the button to your site for you automatically.

## **5) Social media outpost: Twitter**

Facebook allows you to distribute your work in a targeted fashion; Twitter allows you to build relationships with like-minded individuals. It provides direct access to people you might otherwise not meet for a variety of factors, like geography or disparity in industry experience.

Think of Twitter as an endless cocktail party with an extraordinary guest list. When you first walk into the room, you don’t have anyone to talk with yet. But as you are pulled into one conversation and then another, you build relationships with the people around you and are introduced naturally to other people outside your original circle. So it happens on Twitter.

Twitter conversation takes place in tweets, 140-character messages posted in a long online stream. Twitter users include each other in conversation with Twitter usernames (e.g., @yourname), and group conversation around topics or events with hashtags. Hashtags are composed of a hash mark (#) followed by an agreed upon short code (e.g., #CPAC11 for the Conservative Political Action Committee’s 2011 conference).

Sign up for a free account on Twitter.com. As your goal is professional networking, use your real name or a close variant of it,

like your first initial with your last name. You then can manage your Twitter account on Twitter.com, or you can download free desktop applications like TweetDeck ([tweetdeck.com](http://tweetdeck.com)) or smartphone applications like EchoFon for iPhone.

To get started on Twitter, search for and follow the accounts of people and institutions you know. (Becoming a follower subscribes you to a user's Twitter updates.) Be strategic: find the Twitter accounts for editors and reporters for whom you'd like to work, sources you'd like to build a relationship with, and the thought leaders of your interest area. A simple Google search—e.g., "Jane Doe twitter" or "Leadership Institute twitter"—is often the easiest way to find these accounts.

Respond to peoples' tweets and share information in your own as you would in a normal conversation. Remember that Twitter is very much a two-way medium. If you only post links to your writing or only tweet your own thoughts, you're practicing the online equivalent of standing in a room and talking to yourself.

## 6) Final thoughts

This guide is just the start of using new media to jumpstart your writing career. Blogs and other online sources provide near-endless further reading on the elements presented here and will be valuable resources for you as technology and best practices continue to evolve. You may especially benefit from Mashable.com (social media news), ProBlogger.net (blogging and blogging tools), EPolitics.com (useful lessons from political campaigns), and training from the Leadership Institute ([LeadershipInstitute.org](http://LeadershipInstitute.org)).

Further research will supplement the foundation outlined in this guide, but you can't make serious progress before your foundation is in place. So get started. Build your home base, share your ideas on

outposts, and begin to develop a readership for your work online.

Sure, it's just a start, but it can be a great jumpstart for your career.

*Abigail Alger is director of digital communications at the Leadership Institute*

1 Social media strategist Chris Brogan first posited this approach in 2008. For more information, read his original blog post on the subject: <http://www.chrisbrogan.com/using-outposts-in-your-media-strategy/>

## Tenacity pays:

### My journey from cub to bear reporter

By Josiah Ryan

**P**rudently, Mom and Dad refused to fund my wish for a journalism degree.

They agreed it would doom me to abject poverty for the remainder of my days. However, during my senior year a young lady on whom I had a hopeless crush conscripted me into her paper's service. She was the editor-in-chief of the college rag.

Following four months of hell-raising and rollicking good times penning unflattering pieces about the administration's taste for expensive bicycles, hurt feelings on the football team, and college ties to militants in Africa—Blackwater's infamous founder is an alum—I graduated, ready to go in to the wide world and make my fortune. I felt well-equipped with degrees in both philosophy and religions.

Journalism is far from rocket science. Thanks to gentle instruction from the crush (thanks, Lauren), I was able to obtain the basic tools I needed to be a solid reporter and newswriter in those few months at *The Collegian*. I still carry those tools and work daily to refine them.

I flew to Alaska for the summer to go fishing. During my leisure time, I secured a freelance spot—emphasis on free—at the local rag *The Homer Tribune*. I obtained the position simply by knocking on the front door of the paper, explaining I was a reporter, displaying one of those oddly elongated reporter notebooks as proof, and indicating I was willing to work for gas money.

One advantage to working for nearly for free at *The Homer Tribune* was that, once my editors discovered I was not quite a veteran correspondent, they happily invested hours in helping me improve. With their support, it didn't take long before I was regularly capturing front page, above-the-fold slots.

One perk of being a journalist is that you are a part of a global fraternity. There are few corners of the globe where there does not exist a small English-language newspaper. You can go anywhere. Most will welcome you with open arms. Some will even pay you.

When winter winds drove me from Alaska, I decided to become a political reporter in Washington, D.C. When I arrived, I followed a simple strategy. I searched for opportunities everywhere and doggedly pursued them. I asked for help from everyone.

I began by picking up freelance work at *The Washington Times* by calling the managing editor five times per day, every day, for two weeks.

I funded the D.C. venture with fish money and by picking up a non-journalism related internship at one of the zillions of think tanks in the city.

D.C. is crawling with scribes. I attended every event possible and singled out the journalists by those ubiquitous notebooks, of course. I told them that I, too, was a journalist and that I was looking for work.

After a couple of months of this relentless assault on the D.C.

journalism world, *Cybercast News Service* (CNSNews.com) hired me to cover Congress after I met one of their reporters at the Watergate Bar. Per the usual, I dialed or emailed him at least once a day for a month until he secured an interview for me.

By the time I was hired, I was just 22 and I thought I knew a lot about journalism. I was only biding my time before *The Washington Post* or *The New York Times* tapped me to be their editor-in-chief. I was wrong.

Going in, I was worried that CNSNews.com was partisan, possessing views with which I did not agree and that, in some instances, violated the code most journalists attempt to embrace. That was true, but the opportunity to bolster my basic skills in the daily grind far outweighed any stain I received from my affiliation.

My editor took up the hobby of screaming at me. Honestly, I don't know he filled his leisure time before I came around.

Thanks to his gentle instruction, I learned to write news copy at a breathtaking pace (thanks, Terry.) Thanks to other screamers, I can now more than quadruple that speed. The editor also taught me how to challenge anyone from senators to celebrities with questions that made us both shake in our shoe leathers. Most importantly, he taught me how to write nearly clean copy.

I find that pressure generally forces me to rise to my best. I have gratitude toward both my enemies and allies at CNSNews.com who transformed me from a cub to bear reporter.

When I departed a couple years later, I was ready to put aside my role in the partisan game and take up a more serious form of the profession. Like many young reporters, I wanted to pursue a dream of becoming a foreign correspondent.

I chose the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a topic and searched for the best English-language paper in that region *The Jerusalem*

*Post*. As before, I began calling, emailing, and even snail-mailing the editors to ask them if I could come and work—for free. I also deployed contacts I had made while reporting in the Capitol to advocate for me. Since it cost them nothing, *The Jerusalem Post* agreed to take me on.

On the funding end, I found internship money from organizations such as the Institute for Humane Studies that seek to promote good journalism. I found there are dozens of such resources, and most of them are within reach.

At *The Jerusalem Post*, I outhustled a lot of the old-school reporters and pursued every opportunity to become indispensable. The dramatic changes in technology that have taken place in the last 10 years give young journalists a big advantage. Within a few months, they had trained and hired me as a video journalist. I was possibly the first reporter in the paper's 80-year history who did not fluently speak Hebrew.

A couple years down the road, I now cover the Senate for the *The Hill* newspaper in Washington, D.C. Ask my editor-in-chief. He will tell you he gave me the job, in part, because he grew sick of receiving emails and phone calls from me by the bushel. He quickly realized the only way he could stem the tide was to hire me. Tenacity pays. The adventure continues.

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