Chapter 2

Finding the Story

Chapter Overview

All investigative stories start with an idea. This chapter will help students understand that ideas for investigative stories are all around them, and it will help them hone their ability to spot these ideas as they go about their daily lives. Two key points come out of this chapter: (1) ideas for investigations are all around us and we simply have to be alert to them; and (2) the ideas almost always start out small.

This chapter will take students through the various ways reporters find story ideas. And it gives them a small sample of the places they might look for stories or listen for them. It emphasizes that there are many different methods—you can hear of problems worth investigating while on line in the supermarket or while scanning through news briefs. Reporters might find ideas simply by observing problems around them as they go about their daily lives. Sometimes a story idea gestates out of a combination of different observations—a personal experience that was frustrating, a piece of gossip someone tells you and an item you read about in a news brief.

The chapter also introduces students to investigative reporter Morton Mintz and the story of how he broke the Thalidomide scandal in 1962. This shows students how one reporter, by following up on a tip, can produce a story that has great consequences.

Learning Outcomes

After reading this chapter students should be able to:

- Understand the different ways of finding ideas for stories
- Start their own investigative project with an idea that they find
- Understand how an investigative story can have wide-reaching affects
- Find stories on their own college campus

Summary of Key Points

- Stories begin small.
- Reporters must follow up on tips.
- Investigative reporters listen to gossip.
- Being observant is a skill that needs to be learned.
- You can find ideas in daily news.
- At the heart of all investigative stories is a problem or a set of problems.
- Interesting stories can come out of boring material.
- While an investigative story doesn't always involve secret material, it often involves information buried in tedious reports or press releases.
- You can find investigative stories by connecting news items or occurrences.

- Explaining how a problem happened can be a valid investigative story.

Quiz Questions

True/False

1. **T or F** Ideas for investigative stories are all around us and are easy to spot.
2. **T or F** Investigative reporter Morton Mintz broke the thalidomide scandal after reading the fine print on a bottle of medication.
3. **T or F** Government officials and corporations sometimes try to bury important information by making it sound dull.
4. **T or F** You can get ideas for good investigative stories by reading long, boring reports.
5. **T or F** You have to look for investigative stories because you don't want to do one that has already been done.

Multiple Choice

1. Which of the following is a reason a problem is worth investigating

   A. It is timely.
   B. It angers people.
   C. It affects you personally.
   D. It is controversial.

2. Which of the following is an example of how you can find an investigative idea simply by being observant?

   A. You receive a stack of documents in the mail, and when you read through them you realize that a government official is taking bribes.
   B. You get a press release that tells you about a government inquiry into how your college spends money.
   C. A friend who works for a local politician tells you about someone who is on the take.
   D. You notice that professors who have tenure seem to cancel classes more often than the newer professors.

3. Why are news briefs great places to find investigative ideas?

   A. They quickly tell you just about everything you need to know about an issue.
   B. They tend to be about topics relevant to your readers.
   C. They raise more questions than they answer.
   D. They often touch on controversial subjects.

4. When can a daily story suggest a widespread problem?

   A. If it gets widespread coverage on television and radio
   B. If you realize what is being reported might not be a one-time occurrence

C. If multiple government agencies respond to the problem
D. If you realize that the problem is widely known.

5. You can be confident that you have hit on a good idea for an investigative project if _____.

A. People are hurt by the problem
B. No one else but you knows about the problem
C. A problem is complicated
D. People don't want to talk about the problem

Short Answer

1. How can unrelated events form the basis for an investigative project?
2. Annie Lang theorized that we process, analyze and keep only information that meets our personal goals or that is new and different. How can that apply to investigative reporting?
3. How is a tip different from gossip? And how can either be useful for investigative reporting?
4. What kind of investigation might you do in a university cafeteria?
5. You don't just stumble onto investigative stories. So how might you find a story as you go about your daily routine?
6. What might you find when you read the fine print in documents and reports?
7. Why can replicating an investigation someone else has done be a valid investigative project?
8. Name an example of an investigation that can be done in just about any college campus.
9. Why might a problem be worth investigating even if it no longer causes any harm?
10. What does it mean when a reporter reads a story that makes her raise her eyebrows?

Class Discussion Topics

1. Have the students try to recall complaints that their housemates make about the college/university and see if they can turn those complaints into an investigative story.
2. Discuss the thalidomide story that Morton Mintz broke in 1962 and compare it with a more recent investigative story about health issues that you can find at www.ire.org/extraextra . In November 2008, for example, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reporter Alison Young found that over-the-counter dietary supplements often included hidden prescription drugs. Her story can be found at http://www.ajc.com/health/content/health/stories/2008/11/09/spotlight_diet_pills.html That story might have come about simply by asking the question: What's in

this stuff? Discuss how little we know about the manufacturing processes that produce so much of what we consume. Have the class come up with items they buy, use or consume that they think might contain questionable ingredients.

3. Discuss how you would replicate Alison Young's story. For example, give students the link to the Website for the FDA's Enforcement Reports, at http://www.fda.gov/opacom/enforce.html Pull up a report and, with the class, discuss the information it provides and what questions one might draw from it.

4. In Appendix A you will find a story that you can use for a discussion on how one can replicate stories done elsewhere: "No Room for Sex Offenders." In class, pull up the Megan's List data for your institution's neighborhood and see whether any sex offenders live nearby. Discuss with students whether that would make a valid story and how they might go about carrying out that investigation.

Answers to Quiz Questions

True/False

1. False
2. False
3. True
4. True
5. False

Multiple Choice

1. B
2. D
3. C
4. B
5. A

Suggested Short Answers

1. They might reveal a pattern of wrongdoing.
2. We look first for stories that are new and different and then the ones that will advance our careers.
3. A tip is news or a suggestion someone gives you. Gossip is unverified information that you overhear in conversation or you read in a blog or online chat. Both can suggest a problem worth investigating.
4. Investigate where the food comes from and how healthy it is.
5. You can observe problems that are worth investigating.
6. Information that an organization would rather people overlook or that the writer of the report thinks is routine. Tangential facts that suggest problems.
7. Your community likely deals with the same problems; you know it can be done, since someone else already did it; you can use the same sources

8. Where the food in the cafeteria comes from. How the student government allocates funds raised by student fees.
9. If you can explain how and why a problem that did cause harm happened you can help prevent future occurrences.
10. There is something surprising or fishy about it that might be worth investigating.