



International Center  
for Journalists

Advancing Quality Journalism Worldwide

# Ten Steps to Investigative Reporting

By Lucinda S. Fleeson





International Center  
for Journalists



This guide is dedicated to the ideals embodied by the Eugene L. Roberts, Jr. prize, to: “.... the story of the untold event that oozes instead of breaks; to the story that reveals, not repeats; to the reporter who zigs instead of zags; to the truth as opposed to the facts; to the forest, not just the trees; to the story they’ll be talking about in the coffee shop on Main Street; to the story that answers not just who, what, where, when and why, but also, ‘So what?’; to efforts at portraying real life itself; to journalism that wakes me up and makes me see; to the revival of the disappearing storyteller.”

***The Eugene L. Roberts Prize  
School of Journalism  
University of North Carolina***

## About the International Center for Journalists

The International Center for Journalists, a non-profit, professional organization, promotes quality journalism worldwide in the belief that independent, vigorous media are crucial in improving the human condition.

Since 1984, the International Center for Journalists has worked directly with more than 50,000 journalists from 176 countries. Aiming to raise the standards of journalism, ICFJ offers hands-on training, workshops, seminars, fellowships and international exchanges to reporters and media managers around the globe.

At ICFJ, we believe in the power of journalism to promote positive change.

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# Introduction

Reporters in developing countries and emerging democracies face obstacles that are higher, deeper and more impenetrable than any faced by the average American reporter. In many ways, everything these new journalists do is investigative reporting. There are usually no information access laws in place, nor libel protections. They work on small staffs, under daily pressure to produce copy. Sometimes they face threats of violence. Often the pressure is psychological, as they receive little support from their news organizations. While pioneering in a new profession can be thrilling, it is difficult and often lonely.

Many of these journalists are working for new organizations invented less than a decade ago, by colleagues whose only experience was with state-supported party publications. In a few short years, they have set up publishing systems with new technology, created advertising bases from scratch, and recruited eager, but untrained staffs. Now they are setting out to break the kind of stories that were once only dreams. Just the fact of publication represents a triumph.

This brief publication does not pretend to be a definitive text. Rather, it is

designed to encourage reporters to use a new approach on stories of their own choosing, to dig deeper, and aim higher.

The biggest obstacles to first-rate, in-depth journalism are not always the result of a repressive regime, or threats to personal security. Often the obstacles are the more mundane but also difficult tasks of trying to convince editors to spend money on stories, trying to carve time out of busy schedules and trying to summon the persistence and energy needed for a complex story.

These problems plague journalists everywhere, including the United States. The message is: there are no shortcuts to ambitious reporting, but stories that take a lot of time and effort are always worthwhile.

Lucinda S. Fleeson





## Step 1

### Broaden the Definition of Investigative Reporting

Don't limit yourself! Investigative reporting includes more than stories that expose corruption and criminal activity. Important and suitable topics include stories that explain how systems work or fail, or reconstruct a complex event.

Reporters at many newspapers have found that readers have a great interest in how things work, what is going on, how it may affect ordinary people. Investigative reporting may be defined as stories that:

- Contain original work, not leaked investigations from law authorities;
- Show a pattern of systemic problems, not just one isolated incident affecting one individual;

- Right a wrong;
- Explain complex social problems.
- Reveal corruption, wrongdoing or abuse of power.

These are some of the topics over the last 20 years that have formed the basis of good investigative projects:

- How the nuclear power industry was creating reactors without having any place to store the waste;
- How a family decided to take an aging, comatose parent off the life-support systems in a hospital;
- How a squad of police dogs bit and mauled citizens suspected of the most trivial of crimes;
- How a private high school pretended it was so broke that it

could not operate its computers while its directors invested millions of dollars of school funds in a coal mine and other business enterprises;

- How the mentally ill were no longer confined to state hospitals but instead wandered the street homeless;
- How the Defense Department hid millions of dollars in expenditures in a so-called “Black Budget,” using the claim of national security to keep secret ordinary expenses as mundane as toilet purchases.

People care enough to sit down and spend 30 minutes reading a long and compelling story. So part of the fight for all of us is to convince owners, publishers and editors that good stories that take time are worth doing.



## Step 2

### Build Institutional Support for Your Project

Investigative reporting is seldom done alone. It is a cooperative effort that depends on great individual perseverance by pioneering reporters, but they need support and encouragement from editors and publishers, who ultimately make the decision to publish or not.

Many news outlets have special investigative teams, which include editors who act as coaches throughout the reporting process and then marshal the paper's resources to get the story into print.

Building support for investigative reporting is an evolutionary process at news organizations. Usually individual reporters begin the process with breakthrough stories. For instance, at *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, such a breakthrough story



was published in 1977: “The Homicide Files,” by two young reporters, William Marimow and Jon Neumann. It was a textbook story that is now taught in journalism classrooms. The story reported that Philadelphia police were beating and illegally coercing innocent men—often poor and defenseless—to confess to murders. Some suspects were later proved innocent. Other suspects were set free when their confessions were judged illegal. The story resulted in a change of the system at the police department. It was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and brought the newspaper acclaim. The reporters became editors and role models, helping dozens of other young reporters.

Those first stories are the hardest. Eventually, the newspaper gains experience in how to pursue tough stories and also enjoys the rewards: a sense of purpose; respect; acclaim; sometimes prizes; the sense among the journalists that they are doing their best work.

A conducive environment encourages reporters to tackle difficult subjects. Hallmarks of successful investigative news organizations include:

- Willingness to expend resources: relief from other responsibilities when warranted; travel; special projects editors; library resources and research help;
- A mentor system with role models;
- Editors willing to commit space for important stories.

Newspapers in the United States have a longer tradition of institutional support for ambitious project

reporting, but it has been a slow process.

## Building support for investigative reporting is an evolutionary process.

Beginning in the 1960s, “sunshine laws” required public meetings to be open to citizens and reporters alike. Libel protection and freedom-of-information laws were enacted that created a culture of access to information. A strong professional community for investigative reporters also has encouraged reporters, who formed their own association, Investigative Reporters and Editors, to share published articles, techniques and offer moral support.

## Tips for pioneers

Reporters seeking to convince their editors to pursue a project often must do the initial work on their own time. Once the reporter is convinced that a solid story exists and can be successfully reported, then he or she needs to sell the editors on the idea that more time and money are worth investing. At this point it is important not to oversell a project and promise more than can be delivered. Develop at least a minimum story that can be published if the ambitious project cannot be completed.



## Step 3

### Build and Maintain Sources

Develop contacts with a wide array of people who have useful information. It may take a long time — even years — to establish a relationship of trust with news sources. But you can begin, today, to identify types of people with whom you can develop ongoing relationships.

Some of these people's names will never appear in the newspaper, but they can provide information that may turn into stories. They may act as sounding boards for ongoing issues. These contacts may include clerks in government offices, government officials, community leaders, attorneys, police officers, business representatives, firemen, friends — virtually anyone. Other people may never give you a useful lead about a story but can become part of a reporters' bank of interview sources to provide quotes on specific news stories. These may include

government officials, attorneys, politicians, hospital officials, and public relations representatives.

Independent observers and experts are also useful contacts to develop. These may include university professors, authors, pollsters and researchers at public policy institutions.

A reporter needs to evaluate a source's reliability and whether the information was obtained first-hand or is third-hand gossip.

## The goal is to interview sources on the record

Many newspapers have policies that news articles must rely primarily on quotations and material from on-the-record interviews in which the source is identified by name and title. Use of confidential or anonymous sources should be limited. Too frequent use of anonymous sources can undermine a newspaper's credibility, as readers question whether the sources are fictitious. It is also risky, as many people are willing to provide negative information anonymously, but won't stand behind it themselves because it can't be proved. Many newspapers, for instance, require that a high-level editor must approve the use of an anonymous source before publication.

When a reporter promises confidentiality, his or her word functions as a written contract, so it is a promise that needs to be considered carefully. Reporters have gone to jail rather than reveal their sources.

Reliance on anonymous sources can become a bad habit, both for the

reporter and the source. Savvy officials try to elicit confidentiality when it is not necessary. Beginning reporters in particular fall into this trap. Often a source can be brought onto the record by simply saying: "I'm interviewing you in your official position and need to have this on the record." Sometimes a reporter has to refuse to listen to something off the record.

## Use of confidential sources should be limited.

When a reporter talks to a source, there can be several levels of confidentiality: off the record, not for attribution, deep background and various other confusing categories, which are defined in varying ways.

What is important is that no matter what the terminology, the reporter and the source are in agreement on the conditions of how the material is to be used. These conditions are worth discussing explicitly with the source.

## Two independent sources

In order to ensure accuracy, many newspapers have a policy prohibiting publication of controversial information unless it is verified by at least two independent sources of information. This is especially true when dealing with anonymous sources.

A recent incident at the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* illustrates why many news organizations have decided to never, ever, put anything into the newspaper unless it has been verified with another source.

## Common Definitions

### Off the record:

The identity of the source cannot be revealed. Nor can the information be used until and unless it can be confirmed independently.

### Not for attribution:

The source can be quoted but not attributed in a way that can identify him or her. How the quote is to be used can be negotiated. For instance, the quote can be identified as from “a participant in the negotiations,” “a high-level government official,” “a member of Parliament who asked not to be identified,” etc.

In 1996, the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, in the home state of President Bill Clinton, published several stories about the investigation of the president by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr. Much of the information came from an anonymous source, who worked directly with the Office of the Independent Counsel and whose reliable information had led to several accurate and good stories. In early 1997, the source told a reporter that Starr had convened mock jury trials to present evidence that the Clintons were involved in perjury and obstruction of justice. The mock juries, said the source, voted to acquit the President of all charges. The story ran on Page One, on Feb. 15, 1997. The reporter could not confirm the report with a second source, but his editors decided to print the story anyway. The next day it was vehemently denied by Ken Starr and

the newspaper had to print a retraction. The result was that the newspaper had printed an erroneous, very embarrassing story.

### Attribution and plagiarism

Reporters frequently ask about using material from other newspapers, magazines and publications. How much can they use? Common practice among some reporters is to “lift quotes” from one publication and use them again in their own stories. It may be common, but it is lousy journalism. Several U.S. reporters have been fired for lifting quotes. Other publications may provide useful background, but material needs to be checked before using it.

If there is no better alternative to borrowing a quote, then it should be attributed to the original publication. For example: “I’m through with politics,” Mayor Brown told *The Daily News*.



## Step 4

### Educate Yourself About Your Subject

A reporter needs to become an expert on the project subject.

One of the first steps is to check the news clips on the subject, ideally in his or her own news organization's library. This is still one of the most basic and important research tools, yet many reporters, particularly beginners, don't do it. Sometimes news articles will be available on the Internet, or on CD-ROM, but often, particularly in emerging countries, articles are available only in old-fashioned hard copies, sometimes filed only in chronological order.

A reporter needs to immerse himself in other published materials as well, including other newspapers, books, magazines, newsletters, industry journals, government reports, reference books, and doctoral theses. This previously published material is a vital first step in the research process to familiarize reporters with their subject and to construct a map to follow for additional research.

However, previously published information must be independently verified by further reporting.

The Internet has become a vast resource available to anyone with computer access. It is both valuable and dangerous, filled with original documents as well as second-hand gossip. Reporters need to distinguish between what is good, solid, original material and what is second-hand and must be verified elsewhere. Printed library sources should not be abandoned. *Who's Who*, the encyclopedia, even the telephone book offer valuable information. Sometimes it is easier and faster to open a book.

## Create your own files

As a project progresses, the reporter needs to build his or her own file of materials to keep for later reference. Public relations handouts, news releases, original documents, clippings, magazine articles, business cards and other material should be added to the file as it is collected for easy reference later on when the reporter needs to quickly pull facts, dates, spellings or other specifics. As a reporter develops expertise over several years, the files grow in value.

Consider using an Excel spreadsheet with detailed fields to keep track of who and what you know. When was the last time you talked? How did you meet him/ her? Who else does s/he know that would be useful? What conference/ meeting will s/he be attending in the next few months?

Depending on how much data you start to track, there are a number of database programs that may prove useful as well. (Excel is a spreadsheet, and not a database

tool.) Database programs have a steeper learning curve, but chances are good that you already have a place to start on your current computer. On a PC, look to see if you have Microsoft Access installed. On a Mac, you may have FileMaker Pro already in your applications list.

If you have access to a scanner, consider making a digital copy of every receipt, every document and every critical piece of information you find. This ensures that you have at least one backup if something should happen to your physical files. In addition, there are ways to track all of these files, add notes with your reporting and thoughts, and easily link relevant pieces together - without changing the original document at all.

Some people may be reluctant to store important files on their computers because of security reasons. You can password protect your documents online - both Microsoft Word and Pages, for Mac users, along with all the standard office programs, allows you to password protect your files. You should feel safe - as long as you remember your password!

## What is the standard?

Often investigative projects document how a system *doesn't* work properly. The reporter needs to find how a good system operates, for comparison purposes. For example, if reporters are researching a story about how the weather reporting system is failing, it is important to find out how good systems operate in other cities or other countries. Find out if there are international standards or industry regulations.



## Step 5

### Look for Documents

#### There May Be More Available Than You Think

Original documents provide the best, most reliable evidence. They can be quoted directly, although they should be attributed to their source. Valuable documents do not have to be secret, leaked reports. Some examples of common public documents:

- Corporate registry documents with date of incorporation, annual financial reports, names and addresses of directors and the history of the company.
- Reports filed by publicly traded companies with the local securities regulatory authority. Often these statements are required to disclose negative developments within the company, such as pending lawsuits.

- Company annual reports, which often include audited financial statements about profit and losses.
- Company public relations brochures and reports, which often give names, addresses and include public promises about company plans.
  - Bills before parliament.
  - Census data.
  - Medical records.
  - Court and police records.
  - Individual records, such as identity cards, birth and death certificates, diaries, letters, and photographs.

Even in countries with laws that do allow reporters access to government information, many reporters find that obtaining government documents can be an arduous process that is greatly facilitated by having a personal relationship with a willing source.

But even in the most restricted societies, there may be more available than most journalists realize. Many new economies are building new data bases with computer access, some of which are already online. With such rapid changes occurring every day, more and more information will likely be available within your lifetime, if not in the next few years.

The records alone rarely make a story—they often need to be brought to life with interviews and direct observations.

## Some important reminders

- Often the documents are not enough alone. Journalists unskilled in financial accounting may need a financial expert to interpret material.
- Sometimes the data is old and must be updated by either requesting more current information from the source or waiting until new material is publicly filed.
- Financial reports and company materials are excellent briefing material for later research and interviews.
- When people come to you with tips, don't be afraid to ask them how to document them, and get them interested in helping. After all, they are talking to you because they want the information to get out!





## Step 6

### Get Out of the Office and Observe

#### Make Your Story Come Alive!

Direct observation is one of the most powerful tools we have as reporters, but it is underused.

Reporters need to get in the habit of closely observing their surroundings, both for news stories and in-depth reports. Often journalists are eyewitnesses to events attended by few people. One of the functions of their articles is to describe what happened and what the scene or people looked like. Direct observation should be used for non-news events as well because descriptions often are important elements of the story. Consider the power of descriptions of gaunt, starving children; demolished buildings after an earthquake; or empty market stalls in an impoverished city. Sometimes these descriptions are more

important than official statements. This kind of detailed description is the basis of all good writing, whether in novels, literary classics or journalism. All share the ability to draw the reader into a setting and a story. But in order to do it, a reporter must be out of his office and at the scene; interviews must be in person.

First-hand observation of a scene has many advantages:

- Large amounts of reporting can be done quickly, on the spot, while memories are fresh and people gathered. For instance, a reporter on the scene of a fire can quickly find a dozen eyewitnesses and interview them there instead of trying to find their names and addresses to telephone later.
  - By making the first-hand observation, the reporter does not have to rely on second-hand accounts by untrained observers who may lack objectivity.
  - Direct observation can be used to verify or amplify other information. It is often crucial to understanding the story. For instance, if an investigative project examined the sale of a former military site, the reporter would quickly grasp aspects and details of the story simply by visiting the site. A story about a Roma village would be incomplete unless the reporter visited the community and described the village, living conditions and its inhabitants.
  - On-site reporting offers rich detail and texture that can make the story lively and interesting. Description evokes a scene and allows the
- reader to see, hear, touch, smell, even taste what happened. Details and descriptions lend color, mood, vividness to an account for both painting a word picture and establishing a you-are-there credibility. During interviews, note the subject's surroundings, facial expressions, tone of voice, even silences.
- First-hand observation cannot be repudiated or easily covered up. For instance, a *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter observed Russian troops firing on Chechen civilians—an incident later denied by officials in Moscow. The correspondent was able to report the shootings because he saw it himself.
  - Sometimes we need a guide to help us see. For a story on a new virus, a reporter might look through a microscope and have a scientist explain what is revealed. For a story about alleged damage to oil paintings or sculpture, an art conservator may be needed for an expert evaluation.

On-site reporting offers rich detail and texture that can make the story lively...

Once we are in the habit of observing, it then becomes important to select relevant detail. For instance, descriptions of clothing, hair or eye color may not tell us anything about a subject's personality, but if we mention that a scientist is wearing a lab coat spattered with chemicals, this adds to the portrait. The challenge is to write an evocative description without using adjectives or summary descriptions. If

the site is an old building, phrases such as “old and in need of renovation” do not tell as much as specific details such as: “the building is covered with pigeon droppings, the windows are broken, a door hangs by one hinge.” Reporters should not put themselves into the description, with opinions or phrases such as “it reminds me of my Grandmother’s attic.” Avoid judgmental descriptions such as “ugly” or “beautiful.” How many senses can you appeal to in your writing?



## Step 7

### Assess, Assess, Assess

Projects, particularly those with ambitious range, can go on forever, and the reporter can get lost. There is always the risk that the project becomes too big, too diffuse, too vague. A good habit to develop is to regularly evaluate: Should the project continue or move ahead? Should it be published now? Should we drop the project permanently?

Project reporters should regularly ask themselves: What is the maximum story? If we can't prove that, do we have a good minimum story? For example, a reporter may begin to study citizen complaints that telephone billing records are vague, do not itemize charges, and are filled with inflated costs. A maximum story might be that the company charges most customers high rates that are assigned randomly, while giving friends, relatives and favored clients reduced fees. A minimum story might be that numerous customers have complained that telephone bills are vague and incomprehensible. Examples of local telephone bills could be compared to itemized bills from successful telephone companies operating smoothly in neighboring countries.





## Step 8

### Verification and Confirmation

#### The Confrontation Interview

Findings from in-depth reporting are often not welcomed. The reporter needs to convince people to respond to findings before publication. This means making repeated telephone calls to arrange an interview, sending registered letters if there is no response, perhaps even showing up on someone's doorstep. There are several reasons for getting a response. It is the decent and fair thing to do. If unflattering information is going to be printed in the newspaper about someone, it is only right that the person has a chance to tell his side of the story. A response may include some sound and unanticipated explanations. Or the person may correct information that is just plain wrong. Sometimes a person gives a reporter more and better information. At times the response is a short denial, which also needs to be included for fairness. A confrontation interview occurs when the

reporter goes to his subject and reviews the findings. It is important to remember that such a review needs to be complete and thorough, covering each fact that is going to be published in a complex story.

## Preparation for the confrontation interview

- Before you start, decide what you need to get out of the interview. Make a list and perhaps script in advance some of the most difficult questions, and rehearse them with a friend.
- To arrange the interview, it is sometimes necessary to reveal the purpose of your visit, but it isn't always necessary to reveal too much. Helpful phrases include: "I'm doing research on this subject." "I've assembled a report, but it isn't complete without your view. I really think this deserves an interview in person with you."
- Assume nothing. Use this as an opportunity to check material from second-hand sources. Most people are only too happy to help ensure that information about them is correct. Don't neglect basic questions such as: What is your title? How long have you been in this job? What is your degree? From where?
- Ask the question over and over if you have to get an answer, or return the subject to the question you asked.
- You need a full response, both to the thrust of the information, and also to the specific details. Review

specifics, even if you have to introduce them by saying, "For the record, I just want to go over these cases with you."

- Sometimes a simple question, such as "What happened?" elicits a valuable point of view.
- Don't judge the response as good or bad, just note it, or ask for elaboration. The more they talk, the better.
- Make sure you understand the spirit of the response as well as the exact words — remember, you're not trying to trick the person into a mistaken word, you're looking to incorporate their point of view!

## Ask the question over and over if you have to get an answer.

- Ending the interview is a good time to set the stage for a return: "I may need to check facts or spellings or get amplification on some points. If I have any question about the material or need clarification on certain points, I would like to call you."
- Go back again and again if necessary.



## Step 9

### Tackling the Big Story: Organize Your Material

Big stories can be packaged dramatically in ways that also help the writer organize material. Packaging can enhance readability and presentation.

#### Useful tips:

- Organize reporting and writing into case studies of separate incidents. In a story about police abuse, for instance, 12 incidents of abuse are reported and written, one story at a time. They can be presented all together in one large report, with a simple organization: an introductory, summary beginning, followed by documented cases.



- Consider an occasional series, particularly if publication pressures prevent a reporter from saving his material until he can present it in one big story. In this format, stories are presented as they are finished over a period of several weeks or months. A logo signature for each of the stories alerts readers to the common theme.
- Consider breaking out sidebar stories, charts, maps and other graphic presentations, such as chronologies of important dates in the story, or a list of main characters.
- Share documentation with the reader. Original letters, photographs, transcripts or other documents can be exciting visual aids and also enhance credibility. Consider a sidebar or small box about how the story was written with pictures of the reporters and photographers and their backgrounds.
-



## Step 10

### Investigative Reporting in Daily Journalism

#### Make the Time

Reporters frequently complain that they aren't given time by their editors to develop ambitious investigative reports. There is really only one answer to this problem: make the time.

Sometimes investigative reporting means making an extra phone call instead of being content with only two or three. Do the daily assignments that must be done, then use spare time for your own project.

Often the very best stories come from a reporter's routine rounds on his or her beat, talking to people, following the news, discovering a weird or unusual event and then seeing if the same sort of thing has been happening over and over

again. For instance, if a fast-food restaurant serves contaminated food, it's a good story. If five restaurants in the chain serve tainted food, it is a more important story. And if 25 restaurants serve contaminated meals, then it has become a systemic problem.

Often the very best stories come from a reporter's routine rounds...

These are the kinds of stories that come from the reporter, not “top down” ideas from editors who sit in the office and contemplate big issues. What it takes is a reporter who covers a beat, becomes an expert on a subject, and is not afraid to ask sources, in the normal course of events, what they consider their biggest problem or their most serious issue.

Investigative reporting requires an attitudinal adjustment, so that we are always reminding ourselves: think big; incorporate enterprise stories along with the routine news stories; never assume that documents are unavailable; develop relationships with sources and experts who can help you; interview many people with various points of view. If we can do all of this, then we will produce the kind of work that inspired us to become journalists.



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## Useful Web sites

International Journalists' Network: [www.ijnnet.org](http://www.ijnnet.org)

Investigative Reporters and Editors: [www.ire.org](http://www.ire.org)

Reporters' Committee for Freedom of the Press: [www.rcfp.org](http://www.rcfp.org)

International Consortium of Investigative Journalists: [www.icij.org](http://www.icij.org)

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A writing template consisting of a large rectangular area enclosed by a thick yellow border. Inside this area, there are 18 horizontal black lines spaced evenly, providing a guide for writing. The lines are parallel and extend across the width of the page.



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