



Investigative Reporting 101

By

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The Basics of Uncovering What's Hidden

Conducting an ‘investigation’ is something every journalist should learn how to do. Whether you are a ‘general assignment’ reporter or an ‘investigative’ reporter doesn’t change the process of how to conduct an investigation. I started as a ‘general assignment’ reporter and eventually worked my way into doing more ‘investigative’ reporting through the process I’m going to share with you in this series.

General Assignment Reporting

The vast majority of journalists in the United States and other countries do what's called 'general assignment' (GA) reporting. Assignment editors, producers, editors, managers, publishers, etc. 'assign' reporters to cover a variety of stories each day. The stories often come out of the 'daily assignment file' that includes information about meetings and other events around the coverage area. Those stories are usually discussed in the daily 'news meetings' with producers, editors, and managers. Managers often ask GA reporters to share story ideas they have as well. All of those story ideas are put in the 'news mix' for discussion before managers decide what each reporter will cover that day.

Some GA reporters are assigned ‘beats’ to cover (e.g. city government, county government, education, crime, courts), so they spend their time attending meetings and events that fall into their ‘beat’ area. They develop relationships with news ‘makers’ and news ‘sources’ that lead to daily news stories. ‘Beat reporting’ is a great place to begin learning how to conduct an ‘investigation’ that can uncover information powerful people try to ‘hide’ from public view.

That’s how I started and how most young journalists begin learning their ‘craft.’ I was fortunate to work for some news directors who were experienced in ‘investigative’ reporting. They taught me a lot about the process. When I was assigned to cover the ‘crime and courts’ beat, that gave me the opportunity to see how law enforcement officers and detectives conducted their investigations into crimes. Many of them were kind to share some of their ‘investigative secrets’ with a young journalist like me. I also learned a lot from coroners and pathologists, both at the scene of crimes and at their offices or labs.



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Investigative Reporting

Becoming an ‘investigative reporter’ starts with **interest and drive**. You have to be interested in uncovering what others want hidden and you have to have the drive to do whatever it takes to uncover what others want hidden. If you’re not interested, that’s okay. Not every journalist wants to do that kind of journalism. Many are fine with covering a ‘beat’ or being ‘assigned’ stories to cover each day. However, if you are interested in doing ‘investigative’ journalism, understand that ‘interest’ will not be enough to make you successful. You will need a lot of ‘drive’ to get it done.

Transitioning from ‘general assignment’ reporting to ‘investigative’ reporting is not easy to do. Depending on the size of your news department, you may be expected to cover assigned stories all day. That’s where having the ‘interest’ and ‘drive’ makes the difference. I worked nights and weekends, after my regular GA shifts, to conduct investigations. I developed sources inside my ‘beat’ areas that would guide

me into how to use those nights and weekends to the best advantage for completing an investigation.

Once you do your first, and hopefully successful, investigative report, your manager(s) may see the benefit of allowing you more time during your regular news shift to run down leads and do the ‘hard’ work of uncovering what’s hidden. I’m not a sales person, but I learned how to ‘sell’ an investigative story idea to managers. Winning some awards for investigative reporting along the way doesn’t hurt. You may find yourself doing more investigative stories because your manager(s) will see the benefit.

Eventually, ‘investigative reporting’ might become your ‘beat’ area, but even if it isn’t you’ll have the satisfaction of knowing you can do an investigation and help your audience and community through what you ‘uncover.’



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