Quick-hit investigations

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER IN THE REAL WORLD

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You are the key
There is no one else who can make you a successful watchdog reporter. It all comes down to you:

- Assess your skills and weaknesses – honestly.
- Learn new skills (documents, data, software, etc.) as stories require.
- You are responsible for your career.
- Set goals for yourself.
- Explore training from IRE and other organizations.

Manage your time:

- ALWAYS have a story you’re excited about reporting.
- That will force you to streamline time on routine tasks.
- Write as you report.
- Get others involved.
- Ensure success with the minimum story.
- New to watchdog reporting? Start small and gain confidence.

Get ideas

- Extra!Extra! blog from IRE
- Past IRE award winners
- The anatomy of a story – story database
- Tipsheets database
- Read your own publication – identify opportunities
- Be curious
- Think about your own life – what things are you dealing with?
- Follow key people on Twitter and check out trends

Breaking news

Be prepared:

- Know what is available before you need it.
- Identify disasters that might happen in your coverage area.
  - What data might help you cover that?
  - What sites might help you track down information?
- Have a game plan – what will your newsroom do?
- Practice using data for breaking news before it happens.
Once something has happened, what will you do?
- Be creative.
- Ask yourself, what’s next? What do you want to know about the situation?
- Think about angles that can help you stand apart from your competition.
- Ask questions.
- Don’t necessarily follow the pack.
- Remember that data is at your fingertips.
- Define the standard. Should plane parts fall out of the sky and should dams fail? What are the systems in place to prevent these things? Where did the system fail?

Questions to answer:
- How often does this happen?
- Why is this still a problem?
- Who’s responsible for fixing this?
- What’s the fallout from all this?
- How do we compare statewide or nationally?

Quick-hit ideas
Think payroll:
- Highest-paid employees
- Overtime
- Consultants
- Relatives and cronies
- No-show jobs
- Differences in staffing and pay by race

Get lucky with the lottery:
- Get a list of lottery ticket sales
  - Who sells the most?
  - What is the income?
  - Where are people buying more?
  - Overlay with poverty data.
- Get a list of lottery ticket winners
  - Which place sells the most winning tickets?
  - Any repeat winners?
  - Who won the most?
  - Game with the most winnings?

Think taxes:
- Delinquent taxpayers – love this story
- Stimulus
- Unclaimed tax funds
- Farm subsidies
- Business subsidies
- Property tax challenges

Think discipline:
- Police
- Attorneys
- Doctors, nurses, aides
- Teachers
- Public employees
- Dentists
- Optometrists
- Mortgage brokers
- Any profession that’s licensed

Think inspections and enforcements:
- Restaurants
- School cafeterias
- Grocery stores
- Workplace
- Nail salons
- Gas stations
- Day cares
- Tanning salons
- Bridges
- Dams
- Roller coasters
- Nursing homes
- Coal mines
- Foster homes
- Railroads

Think about the consumers:
- Complaints to US Consumer Product Safety Commission, state agencies and Attorneys General
- Airport on-time statistics and chronically delayed flights from the DOT
- Ethanol and damage to lawn mowers
- Dirty hotels
- Carnival/fair workers
- Debt collectors
- Modular home materials and fire hazards
- Recalls and dangerous products

Think government:
- Expenses
- Calendars
• Cars
• Phones
• Vendors
• Parking tickets