

So you want to write for the Media Co-op?

First edition of the Media Co-op Writer's Guide

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1. PLANNING A STORY

Finding the story. If you have already got your story idea, you can skip down to the list below. If not, read on: if you don't already have an idea, a good way to get the ball rolling is to read mainstream and alternative media looking for story ideas. You might see a story in the business section of the *Globe & Mail* about a new pipeline or mine announced in your province. If that story hasn't been picked up as a real news item (i.e. nobody has looked into who might be affected by the construction, what sort of environmental risks it poses, etc) then you have yourself a story.

Press releases are also a great way to get the spark of a story. Scanning NGO, activist, watchdog, business and government websites opens you up to a deluge of announcements, condemnations, congratulations, etc. that could get the ball rolling. Generally, it's a good rule of thumb to *not* do a story based on a single press release. We call this 'churnalism' and it is shockingly common in the mainstream press. But we are alternative media, not a public relations firm.

Once you find your idea, consider these factors:

- Is it timely?
- Could it have an impact?
- Is it relevant?
- Does it have a local angle?
- Is there a grassroots angle?
- What's the tension?

If you are writing for the Media Co-op, the story should hit at least some of these points. The grassroots and local angles are particularly important points for the Media Co-op. Generally our stories need a Canadian focus.

Mapping the story. Once you have the idea, you need to decide where it's going, how it's going to look, who you'll talk to and so on. Everyone has their own way of doing this. Some write pages and pages of notes, some draw thought matrices on whiteboards. However you do it, just make sure you tackle the story with a plan in mind. Otherwise, you may find it veering off track and, by the end, you may be telling an entirely different story than the one you planned.

You should also have a concept of how much time the story will take and what the word count will be. This can sometimes be hard to predict, but having an idea is helpful, especially when you have a deadline. Once you have an idea how long a story needs to be and how much time you can put into it, it will help you ensure that you are not going to overwrite the piece or interview too many sources. A decent rule of thumb is that you should have a minimum of 2-3 interviews per 800 words, plus references to 2-3 documents, statistics or other sources of information.

Is it news, or is it a feature? There's two main types of stories. One is a cut-and-dry news story and the other is a feature. These two types of story differ in style, voice and length.

A hard news story is one that deals with the 5 Ws: ‘who, what, when, where, why (and how).’ Sentences should be short and to the point, and paragraphs should be no more than three sentences, especially if you’re writing for the web. The story should be organized in such a way that the most important information is higher up in the article, and the background/contextual information comes around the bottom. Hard news stories are good for talking about a protest or a recent governmental decision, and they’re most often topical and timely. A hard news story is usually written about something that happened in the recent past. There are variations on the hard news story, depending on the topic. A dispatch from a war zone will be written differently than the coverage of a community bake sale.

Here’s an example of some hard news style pieces from the *Dominion*:

Showdown in Peru: Indigenous communities kick out Canadian mining company by Ben Dangl.

<http://www.dominionpaper.ca/articles/4161>

In BC, Pipes Spell Double Trouble: KSL gas pipeline is low profile, high threat by Dawn Paley.

<http://www.dominionpaper.ca/articles/3990>

Features, on the other hand, are generally longer and the author can create a narrative that can mean information is arranged in a different order. Sentences can be a bit longer and paragraphs are also generally longer. That’s all a matter of choice. Features can be written about something that happened decades ago, but can also be used to put a creative spin on a protest that happened yesterday. It’s a style that’s often used to analyze a subject in-depth or to give deeper context to a story. Features are usually driven by characters, so having strong interviews is crucial to writing a good feature. Features are also the format most commonly used to write an investigative story.

Here’s a couple examples of feature and more narrative style pieces from the *Dominion*:

Water is All of Us: Report from the fifth annual Keepers of the Water gathering by Rita Wong

<http://www.dominionpaper.ca/articles/4154>

Community Reels after Resident Falls to her Death in Vancouver Downtown Eastside: Life "more harsh" for women living in single room occupancy suites by Dawn Paley

<http://www.dominionpaper.ca/articles/4184>

2. RESEARCH

Once you have a story idea and know how you're going to approach the piece, you'll need to do some research. Everyone has their own research style, and it's something you'll pick up as you go along. There are a few tips to keep in mind to make sure your research is accurate.

The internet is an extremely useful research tool. You can find everything from phone numbers of folks to interview to primary source resources, like corporate financial reports, Congressional documents or the Hansard. Be wary of information from sources that aren't verifiable. Generally, the most useful resources online for journalists are government and corporate websites, as well as the websites of advocacy groups, community organizations, environmental groups, Indigenous organizations, and so on. Often these sites will have a section where they post research publications, as well as press releases.

Before you start writing, if you haven't already, take a look at what is already out there on the topic you're writing on. Did the *Orlando Sentinel* already cover the Canada Geese story you're working on? Find out through a Google News search.

Resources to get started on research:

Power Point of research presentation by Toronto Media Co-op member Tim Groves:
http://www.labourtech.ca/tiki-download_file.php?fileId=6

Council of Canadians (<http://www.canadians.org/publications/index.html>): A progressive group that publishes very well-reviewed studies on a variety of topics.

Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives: (<http://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications>)
Progressive economic and policy research.

Statistics Canada (<http://www.statcan.gc.ca>) Should be your go-to spot for anything regarding economic indicators, population, etc.

Parliament of Canada (<http://www.parl.gc.ca/ParlBusiness.aspx?Language=E>) Here you can find information on MPs, sessions of the House of Commons, access the Hansard, and more.

SEDAR (<http://sedar.com>) Publicly accessible listing for all companies listed on Toronto Stock Exchange

Guide to Legal Research in Canada (<http://legalresearch.org/>)

3. MAKING CONTACT

How do you find a source? Every story needs at least one voice, and every journalist wants to find the strongest one for their story, whether it be an unexpected expert sitting atop a treasure trove of insider information or someone who gives fiery speeches like a young Emma Goldman.

Sometimes, it is best to go off the beaten track when it comes to finding sources. Often when a source (say, the head of an NGO) has been interviewed so many times, they get really good at giving cookie-cutter answers (and may be coached by a PR specialist.)

If you're looking to tell your story from a grassroots perspective, your story will be stronger if you can include the voice of someone directly affected by a specific event or issue. Sometimes, those who have more hands-on experience with the matter are the best sources. Finding someone who isn't a PR or media person, at least not by trade, is generally a plus.

So how do we find these people? First off, if you're at an event or a protest, don't be afraid to ask people to give an interview, or approach organizers and tell them who you're looking to talk to, for example, a resident of a building that's going to be torn down. If you are clear about who you write for and what will be done with the information, you might get lucky and find someone who will talk to you. Over time, if you do an honest and careful job quoting people accurately, you will begin to build relationships of trust, and this work will get easier.

If you're writing the story on your laptop in your kitchen, then you may need to find someone remotely. You should try and identify some groups active on your issue - ask them for help in finding someone. Check out the 'media' section on the group's website, there's often contact info at the bottom of their press releases.

Put a call out for information on Facebook and Twitter. Maybe you have a friend who is an expert on, say, housing law and you didn't even know it. You can also ask that your friends and followers pass the word along to their contacts.

Keep in mind that you do want an appropriate balance of voices. What that means is open to some interpretation. For the *Globe & Mail*, "balance" usually means consulting decision-makers and their colleagues in parliament, CEOs or major players on any given issue. Balance from a more grassroots perspective allows different points of view to enter the story. For example, you can show that there are diverging perspectives amongst Indigenous people with regards to a particular agreement with the government, allowing each to outline the pros and cons.

Balance doesn't always mean talking to all sides. If the issue is on climate change, I think it's safe to say we can finally stop interviewing climate deniers - just like every story about an earthquake doesn't have to quote someone claiming the earth is flat. You also have to keep in mind the relative weight of each voice. The corporate media tends to lend a lot of weight to politicians and relatively less weight to community activists, people of colour, women, folks with differing abilities, members of the LGBTQ community, migrants, and so on.

The Media Co-op seeks to upset and challenge the traditional patterns of privilege and news gathering. We're not terribly interested in the voices of politicians – we can leave that to the mainstream media. That said, we're still journalists and if you're writing about mining development in South America, it doesn't hurt to give Barrick Gold a call, or at least to visit their website. You still need context and a point of reference on the other side of the issue. Read their press releases and reports.

Disagreeing with someone isn't reason enough to suppress them from your story. A good story is one that pulls in as much research as possible – that includes governmental and business research.

Resources:

- Canada411 (www.canada411.ca): Great way to find contact information once you've found your person.
- Use the government! (http://www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca/Media-Media/Expert-Expert_eng.asp) This site is one example of a government database of experts. Really, any government department can be very useful in finding info. Their media relations folks are usually very friendly and can point you in the right direction on a lot of things.
- University Expert listings: most universities have searchable databases of experts in any given area. Can be useful to interview in order to get a simple explanation of a complex phenomenon.

Insider tips:

- Google the person's name with the first three digits of the local area code. This can be a great way of finding cell numbers.
- Don't leave a message until you've called at least three times. Be persistent, but firm, and insist that you have a deadline by which time you must file the story. If the person doesn't respond to your calls, include that in the story (But don't write "calls" unless you actually called them more than once).
- Show up. Some say showing up is 90 per cent of journalism. Go to a public event or press conference where you're looking to talk to somebody, and fire some questions at them. We call this scrumming. This works especially well for politicians.

4. THE INTERVIEW

For many, interviewing is the most daunting part of being a journalist. There is no greater fear than that palm-sweating moment before an interview with that source you've been courting for weeks.

But if you keep these tips in mind, you can ace the interview and get the quotes that make a story.

Do your background research. There's nothing worse than going into an interview and knowing nothing about your source. By the time you walk into the coffee shop, pick up the phone, whatever - you should know their middle name and alma mater. You've only got, say, 20 minutes to do this interview and if you waste half of it by asking trivial things you could have found by doing a Google search - you're wasting precious time.

Some good things to know beforehand include:

- What's their experience on the issue? Have they written books/articles on the subject? Have they already given interviews on it?
- What's their angle? Why do they want to talk to you? Do they have an agenda to put forward?

1. **Start with the easy questions.** Don't put your source on the defensive right away. Get them warmed up. Softball questions like "What do you think of the government's stance on the issue?" Which is a good time to mention - always know the answers to your own softball questions. You might have an idea what your source is going to say, but you want to hear them say it.

2. **Ask open-ended questions ...** Generally speaking, your questions should leave room for a thorough answer. Good questions start with, "in your opinion..." and "can you tell me about..." Bad questions start with, "does X cause Y?" or "is it true that X is Y?" Basically, you want to leave your source room to answer the question. However, there will be times you just want clarification and not a diatribe. In that case, yes-or-no questions are acceptable. You also want to make sure that your source doesn't ramble too long or get off track, and sometimes it can be hard to interrupt. To avoid this, constrain your question. Rather than asking an anti-poverty activist "what can be done to end homelessness?" try something like, "what measures is your group proposing to end homelessness?"

3. **Ask one question at a time.** There's two reasons for this. One, the source could be just as nervous as you. In that case, they may jump on the second question you asked and forget the first. The second reason is that some sources can be trying to trip you up. It's also a known media coaching tactic - answer the easiest question of the lot. If the journalist asks, "how can your government defend its anti-puppy stance? Isn't that just evil?" the source can easily, and reply, "no, it's not evil at all."

4. **Be completely silent while the source is talking.** If you really need to interrupt, do so, but otherwise don't make a sound. Two reasons; one, the silence can make the interviewee rather self-conscious and inclined to keep talking. If they think you're either scribbling furiously, they'll keep talking and try to really nail the answer. Two, it's awful for radio and TV. Wait until they've finished speaking before you continue on to the next question.

5. **Hit 'em with the hard stuff.** Okay, so the source is getting into their groove. Here's where you ask them the tough questions. Don't be confrontational, they know that it's part of your job to dig deep. The most scorching questions are often ones that are packed full of research and data. Give the source something to work with. Asking an ethical or moral question usually doesn't work. If you ask a government minister, "How can your government support a puppy ban, given that doing such a thing is just mean?" he'll be inclined to give a flippant and talking point-filled answer. You might get a more useful reaction if you ask, "The Council of Canadians has publicly said that such a ban on puppies would decrease our GDP by 0.5 per cent - given that your government ran on an economic platform, how do you justify your move?"

Keep in mind that a non-answer to a tough question is sometimes as useful as a real answer. If you're asking important questions and your source isn't answering your question - push them. In a respectful manner, tell them that they didn't answer your question. Try rephrasing the question. If you still get nothing, include that the source didn't answer your question in the story.

7. **Do not do an email interview with a source.** Unless you have to. Some sources, especially in government, will want you to email a list of questions, either to be answered via email or phone. Fight this bitterly. It gives the contact the upper hand and allows them to get their spin in place. An interview shouldn't be a call-and-answer routine. It should be raw and unpredictable. There will be some cases where the media relations folks tell you that they have to collect some information for your request. Sometimes, that can be helpful. Besides, if they need to look up the info, chances are they won't be able to tell you anything offhand anyway.

8. **Ask follow-up questions.** It's good to have a list of questions going into an interview, but don't be too stuck on them. Asking follow-up questions shows the source you're engaged and encourages them to give you more. It also allows you to really flesh out certain parts that are interesting or confusing.

9 **Ask clarifying questions.** If you, the journalist who is working on the topic, doesn't understand what the source is talking about - ask them to clarify. Don't assume that your readers will understand something that you don't. Sometimes you may need to ask for clarification multiple times - apologize to the person you are interviewing, but emphasize to them that you don't understand, and in order to cover the story properly, you need to be absolutely clear on what they are saying.

10. **Know how to end the interview.** There are five phrases that are part of almost every interview.

"How do you spell your name?"

"Do you go by a specific title?"

“Is there anything else you’d like to add?”

“How would you like your quotes to be attributed, to you or to X organization?”

“Is there anyone else I should talk to on this topic?”

It is super important to get peoples’ names and affiliations right. Don’t assume that something you saw online is right, ask them, just to make sure, how they’d like their quotes to be attributed.

Sometimes the person you’re interviewing will want to say something and just never gets a chance, they might feel awkward just offering up information. Giving them a chance to tack something on at the end of the interview is always a worthwhile ask. Finally, ask them how best to get a hold of them in case you need to make some last minute inquiries, and if it is okay with them if you follow up later.

Insider tips:

- There are different ways to deal with different sources. Sometimes you need to break down defensive barriers. If they’re a friendly source but reluctant to talk, invite them to a neighborhood café. Don’t go full-throttle on the questioning, save that for a follow-up interview. No matter how nice they may be, do not accept gifts or paid lunches from sources, unless the circumstances prevent otherwise (remote/rural community).
- Some folks might suspect that you’re not going to be kind to their point of view. In that case, at least show them that you understand their point of view. Point out that you called them, you could have just left them out of the story and made it a total hit-job. Give them an opportunity to counter other people’s opinions by using phrases like “There are people that say...”
- Respect the privacy of your sources. Journalists in Canada enjoy some level of protection from revealing their sources in a court of law under common law and the Charter. If your sources request anonymity, either choose to skip the interview because you need someone on the record, or respect their request. Never reveal the name or any contact information of a source who wishes to remain anonymous.
- Cultivate good sources. If someone gives you a great interview and they seem to be on the up and up, ask them if you can give them a call back at some point to follow up on the story. If they know you’re keen, they might call you and tip you off before a story breaks. Developing sources like these takes time, but they are the bread and butter of working journalists.

5. WRITING THE STORY

Writing News

The lede is a sentence or two that introduces your article. A strong lede should be interesting and indicative of what the rest of the piece is about. Do not feel the need to summarize the story. For a hard news story, a lede often gives the main action item taking place in the story, for example; “Police arrested fourty protesters after a day of intense street fighting on Wall Street.” If you ever go to work in the mainstream press, you’ll notice right away that most of the editor’s attention is focused on the lede – having a strong opening is crucial for getting readers interested in the piece.

The style for writing ledes in features isn't as strict. It can introduce a person or a place. For example, “The first thing that hit me upon walking into Donald Trump's office was the smell of urine” gives the reader a sense to associate with the story -- however repulsive it may be -- and it aims to make the reader curious about where the story is going.

As a general rule, avoid using quotes as a lede.

The opening paragraphs. Generally, in a news piece, you'll want to introduce a quote, and therefore a central figure in the story, early in the piece. If you're writing a hard news piece, you want to explain what happened and give the crux of the story off the top. You've got the 'What,' 'Where,' 'When,' and 'Who,' to answer here. Then, start quoting people and providing some context. Provide a scope of reference for an act or event. Look specifically at what went on. It's at your discretion what is more important. But in the middle of the piece, you should try and answer the 'How,' and 'Why.'

Sometimes ending is a bit tricky. In hard news, you should be wrapping up the story you set out to tell. Don't get too ambitious - don't try and tell the history of the Arctic exploration at the end of a story about Harper's trip to the North. Give context, sure, but make it relevant. Don't, for the love of Woodward and Bernstein, summarize. If the reader just went through 800 words of you explaining what happened, it's a bit redundant to try and say it again in 20. The best thing to do is finish the story by either looking forward (“Next, the group plans to hold a bake sale for polar bears”) or putting some finality to the piece through some information that's relevant but not terribly important. (“The Israeli Defense Force refused to comment on this story.”)

Writing Features

There are many ways to open a feature. The best way to learn them all, and find your own way, is to read a lot of features. Very generally speaking, you can open up really narrowly, or really broadly. If the story narrows, you might tell a personal story that will intertwine with a broader picture later on. We call this 'backing into a story.' It's like putting your nose to a painting, and slowly backing up to see the whole thing. If you open wide, you're talking about a wide-ranging issue and you'll give specifics later on, so it's really the reverse of backing in.

A good feature needs to keep the reader engaged. You can put a lot of your research into this part. Research can either compliment a specific experience (e.g. “While Kate’s experience with the police may seem extreme, new statistics show that police brutality is on the rise...”) or let you back into one (“In a country with such a rich history of brutal police crackdowns, it’s no surprise that this report shows a rise in police-related abuse. [insert stats here.] Kate MacDonald is one of those people.”) This can be a nice time to play with sentence structure. Some feature writers have made a habit of making long, flowing sentences that read really nicely but sometimes fail to engage casual readers. A good way to combat malaise and short attention spans is to throw in short paragraphs and sentences in the middle. One-sentence lines that get their own line breaks like can spice things up. Some call this a “throat clearing moment.”

Ending a feature can be just as important as opening it. You really want to tie everything into a single thread, but still without summarizing. A good tactic is called ‘bookending.’ Basically, you finish the piece exactly as you started. If you’re telling a story about poverty in rural communities, and you opened with one woman’s struggle to feed her children, perhaps you can end the story with her being given a new opportunity to support herself.

A strong quote can also be a good way to go out. Something very finite and strongly worded. Be sure to properly introduce the quote so that the last two words aren’t “he said.” It can look something like, “and, standing at the rubble of where his house once stood; Maurice looked at his feet, choked back tears and said, “I can’t put this into words.”

Insider tips:

- Show, don't tell. Use sensory words. Don't say something smells, describe what the odor is. Don't say it was loud, try and capture exactly what the sound was in words.
- Avoid cliches. You're not a folksy depression-era farmer. There will be times where they really will fit, but often they just sound silly. Things like, “and in the blink of eye...” or, “before they even knew it...” are so tired at this point, they don't add anything to the story.
- Allow quotes to speak for themselves, avoid prefacing them. Ensure each quote is attributed. If it is from a press release, don't said “he said,” instead try “stated XX in a press release.” If you interviewed someone by phone, tell your readers where you reached them. If it was in person, describe the relevant details of the meeting.
- Do not, under any circumstances, try to dispense with the word “said.” Many have tried, none have succeeded. Studies show that readers are so accustomed to the word, that they actually read it subconsciously. Unless you're conveying a specific action in the context of a feature (“Hannibal sighed,” “Liza grumbled,” “Franz interjected,”) always use ‘said.’ Exclaimed, asserted, questioned, etc. Avoid them like the plague. They belong in Nancy Drew novels, not newspapers.
- Feel free to suggest a headline, but rest assured that you don't need to come up with anything! This is the job of editors.

6. DON'T GET SUED

All journalists in Canada need to know a minimum about Canadian law.

What you're concerned about is *libel* - the version of defamation that is published (i.e. via newspaper.) If you're printing something that will hurt someone's reputation, which is essentially what libel law is about, you must make sure you have your bases covered.

Disclaimer: The law is different in every province. This is by no means a complete and foolproof guide to the nuances of Canadian media law. Always err on the side of caution and contact an editor or lawyer if you're unsure if your story is potentially libelous. Note that repeating a libel is a libel, so even if you quote someone else saying something libelous, you can be held responsible.

- **Truth.** Maybe this goes without saying, but you have to make sure the accusation you're levying is verifiable. Do not print something that can be potentially libelous unless you have good corroboration. That generally means; more than one source and/or substantial, reputable research. If you're unsure if you have enough, you probably don't but check with your editor anyway.
- **Fair Comment.** As a journalist, you will, at some point, paint a picture of someone that the person does not necessary agree with. If your story shows no particular malice and is accurate, then you needn't worry. This can fall under the realms of quoting a source, so long as they were quoted accurately and the opinion being expressed is one that a reasonable person could hold. It can also fall under fair comment by the author, insofar as the comment made is reasonable.
- **Privilege.** There are two types; qualified and absolute privilege. Generally speaking, those who express an opinion (so if you're quoting them - you, by extension) can be exempt from lawsuit *if* it can be deemed in the interest of the "public good." This also extends in a more concrete way to public servants (either sitting politicians or those in the bureaucracy) - who made the comments roughly in accordance to their job to benefit public policy.
- **Responsible Journalism.** This is a new defense in Canada, basically, if you've done your research and can prove that you've acted responsibly, you can argue on that basis.

The bottom line is if you are saying someone that could damage the reputation of an individual or a corporation, alert your editor. The only person qualified to give advice on libel law is a lawyer. Period.