

Top 10 Tips on News Research

from the
Freedom Forum Library

Need help researching a story?
These best practices will help
you focus, plan, execute,
check and monitor your
news research.

I. Focus on exactly what you are trying to find.

What is the most important information?

What is your question? What do you need to complete your research?

“How and where you are going to search starts with what you are trying to find, what you would like to accomplish, and where you think you might be able to find it. Drawing up a mental or written picture before you go online will help you figure out where you are going to go.”

— Bruce Rosenstein, librarian,
USA TODAY

FOCUS

2. Develop a basic understanding of your topic.

Can you clearly articulate what you are looking for?

- As a first step, do a quick search of an encyclopedia, the Web and a licensed database such as LexisNexis (www.lexisnexis.com) or Factiva (www.factiva.com).

These sources will give you articles, summaries and general background on your topic as well as potential sources.

3. Design an efficient search strategy.

What are the main subjects and keywords?

- Identify the most relevant terms.
- If your online search results are inadequate, refine your search strategy. Use broader or narrower terms.
- Try your search using different search engines or databases.
- Take advantage of advanced features in search engines and databases.

4. Identify authoritative and diverse experts to contact.

Who is best suited to answer your question?

PLAN

- Check relevant government agencies, independent organizations, trade associations, universities and think tanks for experts.
- Look at amazon.com for recent books about the topic and contact the authors.
- Search Nexis or a comparable database, or check a media organization's Web site for interview transcripts.
- Refer back to the articles you found in your initial background search for names and organizations to contact.
- Use experts to find experts. When you are speaking with an expert, ask him or her for the names of other experts.
- Ensure diversity in your sources by using the Society of Professional Journalists' Rainbow Sourcebook (www.spj.org/rainbowsourcebook).

5. Take advantage of all relevant resources.

Have you considered all available resources?

- The U.S. Government has a gateway site to all agencies and their resources (<http://www.firstgov.gov/>). FedStats (<http://www.fedstats.gov>) contains official statistical information on more than 100 agencies.
- The *Encyclopedia of Associations* is a great resource for finding organizations and associations relevant to your topic.
- Subject-specific Web-based databases are often available to the public through trade organizations, libraries, historical societies, government (local, state or federal) and associations.
- Public, university and special libraries often have online resources available in addition to the traditional catalog. The *American Library Directory* can help guide you.

6. Prepare for telephone research.

Have you written a complete list of questions?
Do your questions reflect the critical areas that you need to cover?

- Prepare clear, specific questions before making calls.
- Make sure that the person you are speaking with has the information and authority to represent his/her organization and answer your questions.
- Be persistent, pleasant and firm. Stay on the phone until you get what you need.
- Communicate deadlines.

7. Beware of online hoaxes.

Is your online information reliable?

- Look for clues to determine accuracy and objectivity of the information.
- Find out who registered the site by using www.whois.com.
- Check facts first-hand by making phone calls.
- If you suspect a prank, there are resources such as the Urban Legends Reference Pages (www.snopes.com) which can help determine validity. Most entries are annotated with citations of news articles and/or publications.

8. Check your facts.

Have you checked your facts with the original source?

- Call the expert to make sure you have the correct information.
- Get a copy of the original document that has the facts you want to use.

9. Think long term — keep research contacts and project files.

- Utilize the features in an e-mail system to manage your contacts.
- Keep research or project files for future reference.

10. Subscribe to electronic mailing lists.

- Find Web sites for government agencies and independent organizations relevant to your beat or topics of interest. Subscribe to their e-mail newsletters or alerts.
- Subscribe to listservs to keep on top of current issues and developments.

“Research in the 21st century requires the ability to focus your aims, get what you want, and know when it is time to stop and produce the results of your research.”

—Robin Rowland, producer for
Canadian Broadcasting Corporation,
in *Creative Guide to Research*

“This work is torture on the rump but a joy to the heart.”

—Eduardo Galeano, author, on doing research for a
comprehensive history of the Western Hemisphere,
The New Yorker

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