

Note to teachers: This handout was created by Prof. Banaszynski for use by college students and journalism professionals. This is not intended for use by high school students. Use the StoryPaths Short handout for students. This file is provided to assist teachers in understanding, explaining and presenting this powerful means of generating news and feature stories.

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Generating enterprise ideas

Journalism can be a bit like ping-pong. *Ping!* A story breaks, and a reporter dashes out to cover it. *Pong!* The next day, the reporter is assigned a follow-up – usually some sort of reaction piece, or quick “now-what” story. Day one: We report that the county board raises property taxes. Day two: We talk to Joe and Suzie Homeowner about what the tax increase means to them. Day one: We report that fog is blamed for a seven-car pile-up on the interstate, and interview witnesses and survivors. Day two: We tell the tale of the hero who rescued a child from a wrecked car, and report efforts by the State Highway Division to post better road-condition reports.

Then, often, we are scrambling after the next ping – the next bit of news that needs chasing, the next idea that pops up, the next event that warrants coverage. So we lurch back and forth, day to day, event to event, edition to edition, ping to pong. The result can be a steady stream of thin, predictable, “happened yesterday” stories – not a news report, or a reporting career, rich with depth, variety and surprise.

But any event, idea, issue, press release, calendar listing, trend, agenda item has potential beyond the predictable. And good reporters are constantly open to that potential, using traditional news events not as the end game, but as the inspiration for creative, intelligent enterprise stories. Such stories don’t just report events, but try to help readers understand the significance of events. They explain the background of a situation, tie the present to the past with appropriate historical context, expose wrongdoing and hold institutions accountable, and reveal the humanity in the news. They are independent of the special interests that often organize events. And they provide information and meaning that readers can’t often get from any other source.

They also are a lot more fun to report and write; they are shaped by a reporter’s own curiosity and digging, and they lend themselves to a broad array of storytelling styles.

Finding such stories requires equal parts curiosity, effort and discipline. A good reporter must report the news in the moment – and simultaneously be probing for the story behind or beyond that news. For some, that seems a natural skill; such reporters have an almost instinctive sense of the good stories lurking just around the next question.

But any reporter can develop techniques to discover the story potential in all events. There are endless ways for reporters to find and choose the best ideas:

Seven Paths (and an 8th Way) to Story (plus a few side roads)

This is a practical method to develop a list of creative, but do-able, enterprise stories out of any news event or assignment. It uses the craft of journalism – in this case, a range of story types – to help develop an idea list very quickly, and then to choose the best story

or stories from that list. So it is not only a way to identify enterprise stories, but to focus individual story approaches.

It works like this:

When you are assigned a story, or are trying to determine good follow-up stories to a news event, or have an idea and need to shape it into a story, take a few minutes and brainstorm ideas that fit under the following eight story types:

1. Issue or trend story
2. Explanatory story
3. Profile or human interest story
4. Voices or perspective story
5. Descriptive story
6. Narrative story
7. Investigative story
8. Visual story

Each of these story approaches is driven by a different focus, and prompts a different set of reporting questions. For example, profiles explore the “who” of the news, while explanatory pieces often describe how things work.

By testing news events against this list, a reporter can determine which kind of story might be most useful or interesting to readers. For example, as tax day approaches, readers might benefit more from an explanation of new tax laws than from a profile of an overworked accountant. But on tax day itself, it might be interesting to do a day-in-the-life of that accountant to show how rushed he is handling last-minute returns, and how easy it would be to make mistakes.

By choosing a type of story to pursue, the reporter will be more focused and efficient: he or she will know what information to gather, what sources are most important and what questions to ask. The reporter also will be more confident when it comes time to write; each of the different story types calls for its own known structure or approach. So if you are skilled at descriptive writing, but not as comfortable doing more wonkish issues stories, you can choose the type of story that draws on those skills. At the same time, if you want to learn or practice certain reporting-and-writing skills, you can tackle stories that challenge you and help you grow.

Let’s explore the “Seven Paths” list more closely. Each path involves a story type that lends itself to a range of story possibilities.

1. Issue or trend. Does the event of the day tie into something bigger and ongoing? Is it a window of opportunity to revisit an issue readers need to know about, or to reveal how that issue plays out in myriad specific ways?

Tip: Issues *tend* to be more serious, about policy or social problems:

- The rising accident rate among teen drivers using cell phones
- Battles over changing abortion laws in the state Legislature
- Chronic failures in the foster care system

Trends *tend* to be lighter, about culture or lifestyle. But they also can be serious, driven by changing numbers in population or crime or the economy, for instance:

- Botux parties as combination medical and social event
- Advent calendars as a hot, new decorating trend

Now consider what issues or trends you might explore for our two selected story assignments:

2. Explanatory. Can you show readers why something happened or how something works? Is this event, issue or trend worth a microscopic examination that helps readers understand how their world works?

Tip: Think of the news as “a teachable moment”

Housing prices are soaring: Follow the costs of building a single, exemplary house from the time a developer purchases the land to the time the new owners walk in the door.

A school superintendent is forced to resign: Backtrack through all his missteps to determine what went wrong and who was involved.

It’s Easter/Passover season: Go to an Easter dinner and a Jewish seder and explain the history behind the various rituals.

3. Profile. Is there an interesting character at the center of an event or issue? Can you use a person as a “tour guide” to help readers see/understand an issue on a more practical or human level?

Tip: The person profiled does not have to be an official or celebrity or “newsworthy” in the traditional sense; nor does a great profile need to be provoked by traditional news.

Profile five households to show a neighborhood in transition.

Profile the church woman who, for 40 years, has cooked meals for funeral lunches.

Two thousand scientists have joined to study the effects of population sprawl on the Earth; find out if one is from your area, and profile him about the project and its findings.

Tip: The “character” does not have to be a person. It can be a place, a building, an event itself – as long as it is the central “actor” in a story.

Isabella Wilkerson of The New York Times Pulitzer-Prize winning coverage of the 1993 Mississippi River floods turned the river itself into the central character.

4. Voices/Perspectives. Are there people who can speak to this moment or event in a way that illuminates it for readers, that provides deeper or more expert layers of understanding, or that connects readers to each other?

Tip: Be creative in finding “voices” and storyforms that best speak to the subject.

Do a Q&A with a woman’s doctor to help readers understand the whiplash studies about Hormone Replacement Therapy.

Host a roundtable discussion of five local Catholics to engage a debate about the priest sex-abuse scandal.

Invite readers to share their own (brief) stories about the local dance hall that is being razed.

Collect a “rail” of comments or quotes from selected people affected by a Supreme Court decision.

5. Descriptive. Is there a place you can take the reader – or a person you can introduce them to – to show, in short but intense form, a event or idea? Can you be the readers’ surrogate to show, describe, introduce something or someone they would otherwise not have access to?

Tip: Think of these as day-in-the-life or take-me-there stories. The key is to be very focused and to *show* in a way that makes readers feel they are there. These stories rely on a lot of observation and specific, relevant description. (Travel stories are a good example of this genre.)

State social service have experienced a rash of failures in child welfare cases. Take readers along in the day-in-the-life of a social services caseworker.

Sit in on a classroom for a special ed teacher to show readers what kind of challenges face the teacher and her students.

Sit in on a breast cancer patient support group meeting. Find one being held in a sauna or hot-tub, where the patients are naked.

6. Narrative. Does this event or moment lend itself to exploring a beginning-middle-end story with a narrative arc? Does it suggest a story with a central character, plot, action and forward motion, tension or conflict, resolution?

Tip: Rather than get hung up on the requirements of a true narrative, look for narrative elements – in other words, the *story* behind an idea or event. Many of the above forms of enterprise can, with the right character and plot, be told as stories.

7. Investigative. Is there something or someone wrong with this picture? Can you follow the money or power to self-interest, corruption or dishonesty? Is there a public interest at stake? Does a scour of records, reports or data bases reveal a pattern or problem?

Tip: Investigations don't always have to be big "gotcha" projects that reveal criminal intent or callous wrong-doing. They can rise out of smart beat maintenance and good questions.

The community you cover is holding its annual Crab-and-Corn Fest to celebrate the local fisher/farmer economy and raise funds for the volunteer fire department. Where do they buy the corn, or how much money goes to the fire department?

The Planning Commission grants several small variances in a certain part of town. Check property records to see how owns property there, and whether they have links to Planning Commission members.

A toddler dies in foster care. Who knew the child was in trouble, and did they take action?

The 8th Way: Visual. Does a story need to be *seen* to be best understood? Are there an emotional or physical center to a story that makes it better told primarily through photos, graphics or illustrations, with words as supporting material?

Tip: If the written story spends significant time and space trying to describe something, maybe words aren't your best tool.

A Sikh cab driver, wearing a turban, is attacked by someone screaming epithets about Islamic fundamentalists: Do encyclopedia-style illustrations with text about the histories and meanings of turbans and veils worn by various religions.

Notes:

The above list is not exhaustive. These are seeds of enterprise thinking, but not the whole garden. Add story approaches or forms that fit your subject or publication.

The "seven paths/8th way" exercise should take no more than a few minutes. If you use it every time you write a traditional story – or dismiss an idea as tired or predictable – you will discover new and creative story potential.

Not all stories lend themselves to all eight paths. This is an exercise in thinking – not an end goal.

Every idea developed through this exercise should be weighed against other priorities, time demands and reader interest/needs. Let the best ideas trump.