
Field Guide
REPORT FOR AMERICA
THE groundtruth PROJECT

A definition of GroundTruth:

ground truth (n.)

A term coined by NASA referring to the calibration process used in satellite imagery. NASA states that ground truth is "one part of the calibration process, where a person on the ground makes a measurement of the same thing a satellite is trying to measure at the same time the satellite is measuring it." The two answers are then compared to help evaluate how well the satellite instrument is performing. Usually, the ground truth is trusted more than the satellite.

NASA's technical definition of 'ground truth' serves as an apt metaphor for the goals of Report for America and its parent organization, The GroundTruth Project: to calibrate truth in the digital age by being there to witness events as they are unfolding and to measure their impact on human lives. Amid the overload of information and often confusing data we face every day online, we seek to pursue 'ground truth' as a way to calibrate the information that is out there.

Our goal is to support the next generation of journalists through the value of on-the-ground reporting based on a human reading of events. And, like NASA's definition of ground truth, we trust the human reading more than a technological ordering of pixels via satellite. We believe the human reading from the ground is what we need more of in order to bring complex issues into focus.

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An Introduction:

Report for America, an initiative of The GroundTruth Project

The crisis in journalism has become a crisis for our democracy.

That's why The GroundTruth Project launched Report for America, a new model that will strengthen journalism, enrich communities, empower citizens and restore trust in media by developing and sustaining a new wave of journalists to serve local news organizations in under-covered corners of America.

Think 'Teach for America' or 'City Year' for journalists — a national service program for reporting. In partnership with the Google News Lab, Knight Foundation, The Lenfest Institute for Journalism, The Center for Investigative Reporting, Solutions Journalism Network and other top organizations focused on the future of journalism, the initiative draws on successes of the national and community service movements as well as recent innovations in local news.

Congratulations on joining us in this movement as a corps member in Report for America's inaugural year. Collectively, our corps members are already or will be working in Illinois, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, New Mexico, Texas, and West Virginia. These ten newsrooms include: The Chicago Sun-Times, The Dallas Morning News, KRWG, The Incline, Billy Penn, The Telegraph & macon.com, Mississippi Public Broadcasting, Mississippi Today, and The Victoria Advocate.

As part of a larger organization, we want to start with some background on The GroundTruth Project and share with you how Report for America fits within our larger mission.

At The GroundTruth Project, we are committed to inspiring and supporting a new generation of journalists to be on the ground where stories are unfolding so they can unearth important truths in under-reported corners of the world — which includes the United States.

Since we launched GroundTruth almost five years ago, we have supported 30 international reporting fellowships each year to cover issues that range from climate change to global health to income inequality and to the places where all of those issues are converging.

This year we have fellows reporting in Rwanda, Cuba, Jerusalem, Iraq and elsewhere. In 2018, we are honored to have named our first winner of the James W. Foley Middle East Reporting Fellowship. The reporter is Alex Potter, a talented photographer and writer who also works as a nurse providing urgent care to communities under fire. We believe Alex has the same spirit and commitment to public service journalism and to bearing witness that our colleague and friend Jim Foley did throughout his life before he was taken hostage in Syria and executed by ISIS in 2014. Jim was all about public service, serving two terms with Teach for America in Arizona and helping inmates in Chicago jails before he became a journalist.

We were thinking about Jim Foley and his spirit for journalism when we launched RFA, which is our biggest and boldest initiative to date. Jim's life as a reporter fuels our commitment to public service reporting not only in far-off, under-covered corners of the world, but also right here in America where local reporting is in crisis.

Report for America was first designed by Steve Waldman, who is heading the initiative for GroundTruth. He has an extraordinary background as a journalist, an entrepreneur and a deep believer in public service and is the perfect leader of this new journalism program and important movement.

At a time of crisis in journalism, we are setting out to restore the public service role of local reporting, combining the best of national service programs with the training and mentoring strategies successfully deployed over the past five years by The GroundTruth Project.

You, as RFA corps members, will cover local news, hone your craft, and become the first members of this movement to inject the spirit of service back into journalism.

You should know that the response to Report for America so far has been extraordinary. More than 250 emerging journalists applied for the first three local slots, and 750 for the additional ten slots. The reporters not only had great skills -- often with several years of experience -- but an inspiring sense of public service. They want to help the neglected communities -- and help journalism regain the trust of the American public. You should feel proud to have been chosen from this very selective process. We hold out great hope for you to be of service as a local reporter in your community, and we hope in the process you will become part of a movement to restore the spirit of journalism in America.

You'll be referred to as Report for America corps members but we'd like you to know a bit about The GroundTruth Project, which is launching RFA, and the history of this Field Guide. I first wrote a version of these guidelines when I was launching GlobalPost, an online news organization dedicated to great foreign coverage.The GroundTruth Field Guide provided the editorial standards and practices for a new team of international, freelance correspondents located around the world under the banner of GlobalPost. It served them well as the team went on to win numerous awards for its work.

The idea of GroundTruth was so core to the mission that the Field Guide was front and center at this effort and has been the reference for standards and practices for more than 150 GroundTruth reporting fellows in every corner of the world, including Burma, Egypt, Haiti, Iraq, Afghanistan, Cuba, India, Thailand, Pakistan, Northern Ireland, Greece, Spain, South Africa, Rwanda, Morocco, Libya, Mexico, Guatemala, Brazil and beyond. In each of these places, we were setting out to cover what we referred to as 'divided societies and struggling democracies.' And these days it seems more clear than ever that America is also a 'divided society and a struggling democracy."

Despite the revisions through the years, the standards and practices for good, honest reporting do not change significantly whether they are for reporters working internationally, nationally or locally. The core remains the same. There are tactical differences in approaches in how one carries themselves as an international correspondent or a local reporter in their own country, but the standards and practices

for getting it right remain the same. The core concept of being there on the ground to bear witness is what it is all about.

The work we do at GroundTruth -- from the dangerous warrens of Mosul, Iraq to the heart of coal country in West Virginia -- is important and we are honored to have you joining us.

Best,

Charles Sennott,
Founder, Chief Executive Officer and Editor of The GroundTruth Project
Co-founder, Report for America

The GroundTruth Field Guide

The most important standards and practices for you to follow are those shaped by the host news organization where you will be working. You will be expected to live up to those standards as any other staff reporter for the news organization, and you will fall directly under the editorial supervision and employment of the host news organization. We are sharing this 2018 version of The GroundTruth Field Guide with you as Report for America Corps Members to serve as what we hope will be a useful reference during the time of your public service as a local reporter.

ONE: BE THERE.

It’s all about being there.

We call it “ground truth.”

It sounds like a pretty simple concept. But these days there are too many local communities in America where there is no reporter on the ground covering the story.

Indeed, newspaper publishers in America have lost over half of their employees between 2001 and 2016, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Within the same time frame, hundreds of newspapers have shut down, merged or cut back from daily to weekly publication. During a dramatic change in the landscape of media in America, there is a growing number of ‘news deserts’ across America. Ironically, these local news deserts are emerging amid a flood of information online that bombards us with national and global news coming from cable channels, social media platforms, and online news organizations all pushed content to us relentlessly on our laptops and smartphones. But still amid this surge of information, trusted news about our local communities is harder and harder to find.

Through Report for America, our hope is to turn that equation around. We want to reinvigorate the public service of local reporting by deploying journalists like you to be in the field, on the ground, listening and learning and searching for stories that can enlighten and inform a community about the challenges it faces.

This is not a new idea. It is just good, old-fashioned reporting. But it is needed now more than ever.

We believe that the best reporting requires you to be a first-hand observer of the events unfolding in the place you cover. And through Report for America, we are placing reporters in communities around the country and embedding them at local news organizations where they will live and breathe the story. It is a great opportunity and a real responsibility to cover a local community, to tell its story.

TWO: BE OF SERVICE.

Report for America is calling journalists to join a movement that is unapologetically idealistic and patriotic. This is a call to service. As RFA co-founder and President Steve Waldman puts it, “This is about fighting for truth and strengthening our communities, and we’re not bashful about saying so.”

The most important form of service is doing great local journalism – fairly, conscientiously and with an eye on the public interest. That service may come in the form of presenting uncomfortable truths and holding powerful institutions accountable. It is a public service to equip residents with more information and more power

This underlines the idea that journalism should be geared toward helping a community, not just highlighting its challenges or digging to find out where it is failing, we are asking reporters to roll up your sleeves and do some direct community service. That doesn’t mean we want you to become town boosters. But we do want you to be present in your local community and contribute, not only asa journalist, but also in the form of a service project.

The two potential service projects we’re encouraging you to consider right now are: 1) helping a local high school create or enhance the student-run publication or broadcast, and 2) developing a youth media project to take place within an existing organization or institution serving youth in your community.

Most of this will be done on your own time. We’re thinking about three hours a week. In July, you’ll be asked for a plan for how you want to structure your community service requirement.

THREE: BE A LISTENER.

The greatest reporters hear as many sides of an issue as possible before they begin writing or producing a story.

The most memorable stories are those that surprise us, that contravene our preconceptions. And these stories come from listening carefully to the community you are covering. They come from being fair and reporting without bias. Most of all, they come from listening.

Give voice to the voiceless. It is a big world out there and too often our news is shaped by politicians and officials. Of course, their pronouncements from press conferences affect lives, and we need them in our stories. But the best reporting is the kind that comes from the street — the voices of those who stand to be affected by the decisions of the powerful.

It is a customary practice in reporting these days, but back in the early 1960s, when the legendary New York City columnist Jimmy Breslin was writing for the New York Daily News, he broke new ground by listening and giving voice to the people from the streets of New York. In perhaps his most vivid expression of this style of reporting, Breslin covered the 1963 state funeral of John F. Kennedy. Amid the dignitaries, the heads of state and the somber weight of the moment in history, Breslin interviewed the man whose job it was to dig the ditch where the fallen president's casket would be lowered into the earth. In the parlance of a New York City newsroom, it's now known as a "gravedigger story." It's the story about the little guy that tells us something important about a big moment in history.

Bring this spirit of listening — and giving voice to the voiceless — to your work.

FOUR: BE FAIR AND ACCURATE.

From careful listening comes fair, truthful reporting.

So listen to what people say and check the facts they provide. Check spelling, particularly the spelling of names, and be sure you have your sources' proper titles.

Accuracy matters, and the reputation of a news organization and your reputation as a correspondent rely on getting it right. There is a great axiom of deadline reporting: When in doubt, leave it out. Live by that. Only write about the things you know, the things you've seen with your own eyes, and be sure you have clear and accurate attribution on everything else. If you live by these relatively simple and straightforward rules, you will always be on solid footing.

Each of you will have a code of ethics, standards and practices, and policies for correcting errors. These standards and practices will be shared with you by your editors at the host news organizations where you will serve. You will live by those policies and they will preside over how you carry yourself as a reporter.

But there is one shared, basic policy for corrections and clarifications, which can be summed up quite succinctly: When you make a mistake, you should always seek to correct it and let your readers know you have done so. Any reporter whose work requires persistent corrections on issues of material fact will be warned, and his or her relationship with the host news organization and with GroundTruth and Report for America will be terminated if inaccurate reporting continues.

It is far better to get a comment on the record than rely on unnamed sources.

Reporters cannot write a story in which he or she has a vested economic interest or a clear political bias. The spirit of full disclosure matters in reporting and you should let your host news organization know if you believe there is any potential line that might be crossed during the course of your reporting.

If you are ever working on a story that you believe is potentially libelous or if anyone you are reporting on threatens any legal action, you are obliged to get in touch with your editor at your host news organization promptly and directly.

FIVE: BE HONEST.

Always identify yourself as a reporter when you are working in the field, and carry your press card issued by your host news organization and by Report for America with you at all times. Always live up to the requirements of the press pass and be sure you are aware of the rules and regulations governing a press pass as issued by a municipal, state or national entity.

You cannot manipulate work — including writing, photos, audio and video — in a manner that distorts or misrepresents reality. Any fabrication of quotes or made-up reporting will not be tolerated and will be grounds for the host news organization to immediately dismiss a reporter. Plagiarism may also be grounds for termination. Plagiarism includes not only directly copying someone else's words, but also heavy borrowing of quotes, ideas, images and insights without proper attribution.

Reporters should not accept gifts or payment from a source, nor should they offer any gifts or payment in return for getting a story.

Transparency is crucial in all aspects of our work, from reporting and writing to production and funding.

The funding guidelines for GroundTruth and Report for America are available upon request and ensure complete editorial independence and control to the host news organizations where you will be working.

SIX: BE ON TIME

Deadlines matter. Stick to them.

One of the great challenges for emerging reporters is making deadline, and you will need to work hard at this with the editors of your host news organizations. Work with them to set a clear, agreed upon deadline, and be sure you get your story filed on time.

You will be working for your host news organization and they will offer you clear guidance and a clear sense of repercussions that can come with consistently failing to make deadline. For many news organizations, particularly those operating around live broadcasts, it is grounds for dismissal.

One of the most important things to learn in a newsroom is clear communication with your editor. Let them know right away if the story is taking longer than you expected so they can re-adjust the workflow to accommodate the reality. Stay in touch, check in from the field, and be sure you have done everything you can to make the original deadline.

SEVEN: BE SOCIAL.

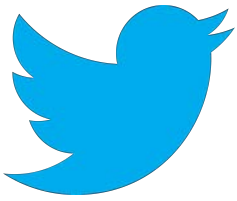
All journalists need to focus on building a network of followers and potential sources, and that is done most directly through social media. But social media postings must follow the same standards and practices for fairness that govern your reporting, and that are spelled out in detail in this document. Think of your social media platforms as an extension of your journalism and one where you uphold the same standards for fairness and accuracy. That means you should refrain from taking positions on issues you may be covering if that could affect the public's perception of your fair-mindedness.

This is a complex equation and one that is evolving greatly. The New York Times has recently issued its own standards and practices for social media for its reporters. We invite you to read the New York Times policy as a solid baseline for how to think about your own social media strategies while working for a host news organization as part of Report for America. However you will follow the social media guidelines of your host newsroom.

Social media is not only essential to connecting journalism with a wider audience, but it is also increasingly part of the reporting and digital storytelling process. A large percentage of most news organizations' Internet traffic comes from social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, YouTube and Instagram. No company can thrive without consistent, creative sharing of published work.

The same is true of reporters in the field, whether you are early in your careers or veteran reporters. If you are trying to make your name known, increase the reach of your work, connect with sources and/or reconnect with people you already know, it pays to invest time in select social media accounts.

If your social media network is used in a way that your host news organization or GroundTruth/Report for America deem as unfair or irresponsible, it can be grounds for dismissal from the RFA program.



www.twitter.com/groundtruth
www.twitter.com/report4america

https://www.facebook.com/groundtruthproject
https://www.facebook.com/Report4America/

www.instagram.com/groundtruth
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EIGHT: BE A STORYTELLER.

Experiment with storytelling in the digital age and have some fun with it.

You will be taking editorial direction from your host news organization, but we hope you will bring a spirit of innovation and creativity to storytelling. Work with the host news organization to find ways to experiment with how you tell stories in an age of dramatic transformation of media.

We don't expect anyone to be an expert at everything. We respect people who prefer to stick to their own craft as writers, photographers or videographers. Indeed, you should focus on your craft and improve your skills as a storyteller in your assigned medium. That said, we invite all of you to experiment with reporting across different platforms.

We hope photographers might try their hand at writing, and writers to try their hand at photography. And we want everyone everywhere to think about capturing breaking news events on video with your phone or any other device you can get your hands on. Be creative. Be innovative. But remember, you have to answer to your supervising editors on these experiments. Where possible and practical, we will discuss and explore multimedia reporting within our online community space during your year of service with Report for America.

At the end of the day, great journalism is often about great storytelling. And what we want more than anything is for you to go out and find great stories.

Advice from veteran journalists

As part of GroundTruth's commitment to mentor and support the next generation of journalists, we publish a twice monthly newsletter, Navigator, that provides practical advice and meaningful opportunities. Each newsletter features an interview with a veteran reporter or an expert about a practical or conceptual demand of journalism. We also present a selection of Navigator columns that may be a useful reference during your year of service. We recommend you sign-up for our Navigator newsletter to read throughout (and after) your year of service

Remember, too, that you will be surrounded by veteran journalists at your host news organizations. Ask for help, advice and mentorship.

Community Journalism Wisdom From Kentucky

In 2017, GroundTruth's Crossing the Divide team spent two and a half months in the road. In each location across the country, we partnered with local newsrooms and bounced ideas off veteran reporters, to make sure we were on the right track.

One of the reporters who really struck a chord with us was Bill Estep, a veteran reporter at the Lexington Herald-Leader. Bill is a native of eastern Kentucky and has spent the bulk of his career covering the community in which he lives.

Bill took us on a journey through eastern Kentucky — from a former strip mine to the health clinic of legendary Appalachian advocate Eula Hall. She created the model for providing rural healthcare and lobbied for better government programs in Eastern Kentucky.

We were in awe of Bill's expertise about eastern Kentucky, a region that has been misrepresented and misunderstood by the national media, and his willingness to share that knowledge with a group of young, out-of-town reporters.

In 30 years of reporting on eastern and southern Kentucky, Bill has not lost his curiosity or his sense of public service.

Here is a brief conversation we had with him that's worth sharing with you, as you prepare to enter a new community or, for some of you, return home to report:

GroundTruth: What work have you done that you're most proud of?

Bill Estep: We published a series of stories [in 1989 about Kentucky's school system].

Kentucky, at that time, had one of the worst rated public school systems in the nation, especially in rural Kentucky.

The schools were very badly funded and the quality of education was just not very good. [Our series] looked at a lot of those problems in terms of corruption, in terms of nepotism — people hiring unqualified people to teach just because they were related to somebody — problems of property not being properly assessed. There was a big problem in Eastern Kentucky of county tax assessors not valuing property properly — not placing a high enough value on it — which meant taxes were lower. And they did that as a political function — they would keep people's taxes low so that the people in turn would vote to have them re-elected.

It was a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize, and it helped. The next year, in 1990, the state legislature passed an education reform act that at the time was a model for the nation.

The legislature approved a billion dollars in new taxes — in a very rural, poor state, a billion dollars was a significant amount of money to pump into the schools. And that series helped make the case for that law to be passed. And that's something I'm proud of, because there's been more than a generation of kids since then who have gotten a better education in Kentucky.

Even though the Herald-Leader is a mid-size daily, you can still have a big impact on public policy and problems in your state at just about any size newspaper where you are.

GT: How'd you get your start in journalism?

BE: I started high school the same year, in 1974, when Richard Nixon resigned as a result of the Watergate scandal. And it was a pretty exciting time in journalism — a lot of people were drawn into the business because of they saw the ability to do that kind of public service and hold public officials accountable.

GT: What were the difficulties or challenges with starting your career?

BE: My first job was at a newspaper where there were three people, so you don't have a backup or a lot of support. As a young reporter, especially in that kind of situation, if you're working in a small office, there are going to be times when questions or situations arise. Some advertiser is mad, some source is mad, maybe you have questions about legalities, which you don't have a lot of experience with yet.

You might be in situations where you feel like you don't know what to do, or you don't have the knowledge to handle a situation.

The other thing you run into with smaller newspapers — there's not a lot of resources in terms of training, additional education. They're not going to send you to take part in conferences or those sorts of things where you're going to learn some other skills there. So one of the drawbacks is you're going to be a little bit more on your own.

And it also helps if you can look for a mentor at a larger newspaper. There's a newspaper in Eastern Kentucky that's very small — I think they have a staff of two reporters. I met one of the reporters at an event a few months ago, and he asked if he could bounce things off of me on occasion and I told him, "Sure." So I'm trying to be a little bit of a mentor to him.

Sometimes [a mentor] can be a professor at [journalism school] … Keep that relationship with some of your professors so you can call and check with them.

It is a good resource, even at a small newspaper, if you can be a member of a professional organization, like Investigative Reporters and Editors or Society for Professional Journalists.

GT: What's difficult about reporting in the community you're living in, and where you have a long history?

BE: I grew up in the town of Somerset. It's a town of 11,000 in a county of 60,000 people.

When you work in a small community, you're obviously much closer to the people you cover. There's no insulation, there's no barrier, there's no anonymity. When you work in a larger city, there are going to be people in your beat who you deal with over and over, and they may be mad at you from time to time over something you write. But in most of those places, they understand that it's part of the job.

But in rural places and smaller communities, everything is more personal — because you know a lot more people and more people know you. So you can get into a situation where it might be uncomfortable holding people to account. If it's so uncomfortable that you can't do it honestly, then you can't do that story. That becomes a conflict of interest.

You do the job as honestly as you can. You don't sandbag people, you don't ambush people, you talk to them honestly. You be as fair as you can, and let the facts dictate what happens.

GT: Did you ever want to work in a bigger city, for a big newspaper?

BE: I grew up in Kentucky. I live in the town where I grew up. So it's the place that I've always cared about. I have had some opportunities — I've been recruited at times to move to other newspapers.

But this is the place that I care the most about. I could be a reporter in some other city — it's not that I don't care about what happens in Atlanta or Dallas, we all should care what happens everywhere. But the place I care most about is right here. It's where I live, it's where my family lives. It's the place I want to be better, and help be better through reporting, if I can do that. So I never seriously entertained the idea of leaving it.

I would add one reason for [not leaving] is because [the Herald-Leader] allows some really good opportunities to provide some really good coverage in a place that I care about. I wouldn't have wanted to stay forever at the weekly paper where I started because, in those days, the pay was pretty low. There is an interest in moving up for better pay, or a job where you can do bigger stories if that's what you want to do.

But to me there is a tremendous amount of value in being a good reporter even at a very small newspaper. Because those communities need that kind of coverage just as badly as Boston or Los Angeles. Every place needs — in my estimation — good, honest and objective news coverage. And that's a thing that's becoming, sadly, more and more difficult to come by.

I feel incredibly lucky that I've been able to stay in the place that I care about and do the kind of work I've done as well.

Tips for filing public records requests

Public records requests are essential parts of a reporter's arsenal if you're trying to get information from government entities. If you've tried working with a public information official to get information, and that hasn't been fruitful, then you might want to submit a public records request — a legally enforceable document.

Maybe you're intimidated by the whole process because you've heard about fellow journalists' horror stories. But think about the news organizations, big and small, that use public records regularly to hold the state accountable. (There's a whole curated list on the Investigative Reporters and Editors Extra Extra blog.)

Shawn Musgrave is an investigative reporter whose work has appeared in The Boston Globe, Vice and Politico. He's written on the intersection of law enforcement, technology and privacy. He started out as an intern and reporter at MuckRock, a journalism nonprofit that publishes investigative pieces and helps people file public records requests. Shawn has filed many public information requests from municipal, state and federal agencies for his stories. He has the following tips.

**Be advised: Every state has its own public information laws. The federal Freedom of Information Act governs federal agencies. You should understand which jurisdiction the agency you're seeking information from is in, and which exact statute governs a public records request.*

1. Do your homework

First, you need to figure out whether the agency you're trying to get information from is even subject to the state or federal public records law. Once that is a go, you need to know what kinds of information you can expect to find before you file your public records request.

"Doing the research to figure out what exists will help you avoid run ins and confusion with the [public records] clerk," Shawn says. "If you have a particular government citation, that can help. A lot of times, I'll find the policy or the law that requires a certain record to be kept in the first place, so that provides you with a description of what you're after. There's a law for instance in Massachusetts that requires police to keep a log of every arrest that is made each day. So I just ask for that log."

The document you're asking for doesn't have to be as specific as a particular MOU between a state entity and a private contractor. It could be a broader request says Shawn, as long as the request is framed discretely. "That could be all emails sent to the mayor from the police chief for the past two weeks. It could be a spreadsheet of all 911 calls for the Fourth of July," Shawn says.

Usually documents related to how taxpayer money is spent is a safe bet to start if you're trying to figure out what kind of information exists about a particular topic. You can see examples of FOIA requests Shawn has filed, from the broadly discrete to the specific.

2. Always include the statute in your request

Once you've figured out what exactly it is you're requesting, you need to craft your request. The request should always include "a very clear description" of the documents you want and the public records statute which governs the request. "Citing the statute transforms this from an email that you're sending to a government agency to a formal, legally enforceable public records request that triggers legal obligations on the part of the agency that you're talking to," Shawn says.

You can use the boilerplate language such as "Pursuant to the [state/federal public record statute], I hereby request the following records:"

"Put that statute in as many places as you can: in the subject line of the email, sprinkled throughout the body of the email," Shawn advises. "Make it unmistakable that it's a public records request."

3. Know your rights

If you're filing a public records request for a municipality that doesn't usually get such requests, the clerk might not know the law. If you're filling a public records request at a large agency, the clerk might be trying to dodge the request or delay it.

So you have to know the law to make sure it's being followed, and know what your recourse is if you are feeling obstructed. "The laws are being updated, not to mention the case law, so you need to get your foundation of knowledge up," Shawn says.

"Some of the common ways that clerks can screw up a request, whatever their motivation, is charging high fees or trying to charge high fees…and [they can] delay," Shawn says. "Some laws give the requester leverage to push back on processing times that don't seem reasonable."

Most laws require a response within a certain amount of time, and provide legal recourse for the requester if the request goes unfulfilled within that period of time.

4. Know When To Give Up

A lot of things could not go your way. The clerk might tell you it will cost thousands of dollars to fulfil your request, or the records may be heavily redacted, or your request may just be straight up denied. In those cases, you can appeal. But you have to decide

whether it's an effective use of your time and money to pursue a legal process to get the documents.

"It often comes down to money for me," Shawn says. "I'm an independent reporter. Even if I were in a newsroom, very few newsrooms are willing to shell out thousands of dollars."

5. Find the Information through other avenues

Sometimes, it might be that the information is already out there. Another organization may have already requested and received the information you're looking for. While you're reporting and making contact with sources, you may find that they are willing to give you the information.

"I will typically go ahead and put my public records [request] in and then try and acquire the records by other means," Shawn says. "Those are not exclusive to each other, and I wish I had learned that more quickly. FOIA is not like going on Amazon and picking what records you want and getting the info right away. It's a long process, agencies get a lot of these, or they don't have much staff, or the records you're trying to get at are tough to locate or require lots of review – and in the interim you can try to get those records by other means. That's just the reporting process."

Tips for Investigative Reporting

When most people think of investigative reporting they think of the Boston Globe's Spotlight team exposing systemic clergy abuse and cover up in the Catholic Church. Or Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of the Washington Post, whose reporting led to President Nixon's resignation.

But investigative reporting, as it was initially in the Spotlight case, can be locally focused and serve a community's need to know about any corruption or misfeasance.

Reveal, the investigative podcast and radio show, looks into different topics weekly, and investigations have ranged from abuse in facilities for people with disabilities in New Hampshire to the lack of a coherent database for missing persons.

We spoke to Reveal's Katharine Mieszkowski, who had these tips to share with you on reporting an investigative story.

Assessing the strength of your investigation

Katharine says the Reveal team asks the following six questions to assess the strength of their story ideas and how well-suited the story is for an investigation. She stresses none of these questions are determinative.

"It's not like you have to get the right answer to every question to do the story, but it helps you decide whether to invest in the story," she says.

1. **Are you exposing a hidden problem?** If the story would introduce new information into the public discourse, that weights it in favor of pursuing. An example is an investigation Katharine and her colleague, Lance Williams, did for Reveal about the California drought. Of course, lots of Californian and national news organizations were reporting on the drought.

But Katharine and Lance looked specifically into the residential customers who were using massive quantities of water, despite calls by public officials to conserve water. These "mega-users" could just pay the $90,000 water bill. Katharine and Lance asked for water use data from regional water agencies, and pulled the numbers together to tell a story. "What made that different than [other] explanatory drought stories is we went out and got information that nobody was putting together," Katharine says. "We were able to say something that no one else was saying."

2. **Can you quantify the problem?** "We won't call a story investigative if it's anecdotal," Katharine says. "You want it to be data-driven in some way." This means being able to say how many people are affected by the problem, and creating real parameters and metrics to describe the scope of the problem.

3. **Has the problem been reported on before?** “If you’re going to invest your time [on the project], you don’t want it to be derivative,” Katharine says. But that doesn’t mean just because something has gotten coverage, you can’t come at it from an investigative angle. “Some great investigative projects are much more comprehensive takes on something someone else has reported on,” Katharine says. She gives the example of the Boston Globe’s Spotlight team, that exposed the priest abuse scandal in the Boston archdiocese. “Some of those abuses by priests had been reported,” Katharine says. “But [the Spotlight team was] able to show in a systemic way that and the hierarchy at the church knew about it.”

4. **Can you identify victims?** That basically means, was someone harmed by the problem you want to investigate? The victim can be as general as taxpayers or as specific as a particular person. If a law was broken, but no one was harmed, it sort of weighs against pursuing the story.

5. **Can you hold someone accountable?** “Is there someone responsible for enforcing a law they aren’t enforcing, or have they done something illegal,” Katharine says. “Ideally [you’d] interview them and take them to task.”

6. **Is there potential for positive change?** Could exposing this problem mean it gets addressed? Would a wrongdoer get investigated or would a law get changed? Katharine says an early mistake an investigative journalist can make is not being critical enough of their idea. You might love your idea, but unless you really vet it, you’ll be halfway through your investigation and find that maybe it wasn’t worth the investment. Maybe the social cost is actually really low, or the problem is really obscure.

Pursuing Tips

Many investigations start out as tips. How do you know whether a tip is valid, or whether it will send her on a wild goose chase? It’s kind of a calculated leap of faith and a healthy dose of skepticism. “There are going to be some dead ends where this isn’t going to pan out,” Katharine says. “Often the thing that will help is if someone is calling you and telling you things — [ask] for all kinds of documentations … whether that is court documents or their personal records or diary entries.”

You’re just trying to figure out whether the stuff they are saying can be confirmed. Also learning about the person who is calling you with their tip: their criminal record, their history, who they are, what they do. Katharine says she even backgrounds the characters in her stories who were victims of a problem she’s investigating.

“We do that when we are presenting people in our story — not because everybody has to be a perfect victim — but to assess the veracity of what they’re saying and their motivations,” she says.

Katharine says one of her early investigations, into grocery stores that price gouged WIC recipients, came to her as a tip.

Accessing information

In the last Navigator, we talked to Shawn Musgrave about filing public records requests. Those requests are going to be crucial to any investigation (since it's going to be data-driven). But as Shawn discussed, and Katharine reiterates, there will likely be obstacles to getting your request fulfilled.

Katharine says one way to deal with an agency that is refusing to give you information they are legally required to record and produce, is to record every interaction with them. "You can document all your attempts to contact them: every phone call, every email, every letter," she says. "Sometimes you can end up reporting about the roadblock, because it can be embarrassing to the agency, but you don't want the story to become that you can't get the story."

She adds that you might even be able to sit down and negotiate with the public information official, to try to drive down the cost or the time they are telling you it will take to fulfill the request.

When do you know you're ready to publish?

You're going to uncover so much information, and want to go down so many paths. Katharine says getting distracted is a serious pitfall of doing investigative work. But unless a better story really does present itself, you're going to want to stay the course.

Another issue is that you might spend too much time on the investigation. "There is a point of diminishing return," Katharine says. "You might be 90 percent done and it's ready to publish." You don't always need that last quote or request for comment. That's why Katharine says you need a good editor. He or she has some distance from the project, and is better equipped to assess when it's ready to see the world, even if you don't think it is.

Advice on asking tough questions

Every journalist will have interviews in the course of their careers that they are nervous about, or feel unprepared to handle. It might be because you're asking tough questions of someone who does not want to be challenged. Or it might be that the subject matter is really difficult. What is it like talking to someone about the worst thing they've ever done in their life? How do you respectfully challenge someone you know is not being honest with you?

Beth Schwartzapfel has been in these situations. She is a staff writer with The Marshall Project, an online publication that does in-depth reporting about criminal justice.

Beth has interviewed inmates who've committed violent crimes, victims of crimes, district attorneys, police chiefs and the whole range of people involved in the criminal justice system. Needless to say, these conversations have been hard, for varied reasons. We hope this edited excerpt of our conversation with Beth will prove helpful as you think about how to approach difficult interviews

GroundTruth: How do you prepare when you know you have a difficult interview coming up? Do you go into an interview with a list of questions written down?

Beth Schwartzapfel: It depends on what's difficult about it. If an interview is difficult because you're dealing with a public official who's being cagey, or a public information official whose interests are served by hiding information – preparing for that is different than preparing for an interview with someone who's suffered a terrible trauma, or someone [who experienced] something terrible and doesn't want to talk about it.

I try not to follow a script as a general rule. I want it to feel like a genuine conversation and not to feel bound by a preconceived notion of what we're going to talk about. There is certainly some essential information I do want to find out, but that's different from having a script.

It gets more pressing where I have less time, those are the interviews where I have a much more tightly-scripted plan. But if there is no limitation, I go into [the interview] with essential things I want to know, and let it flow from there.

A lot of times I don't even think of an interview as an interview. I just think of it as a conversation. It makes it feel less stressful and more comfortable. I think of it like that in my head, and it helps put people at ease and makes it feel more organic.

GT: How do you create a rapport with an interviewee you don't have a long time to get to know, or whose contact with you is restricted, such as an inmate?

BS: That kind of rapport is only necessary in certain instances. In more professional settings, where you're interviewing an expert or public official, you don't have to spend a lot of time doing that.

In the case of a vulnerable person, I start by saying, in all honesty, "I am really honored you're choosing to speak to me. I know this must be really difficult. I hope to honor the fact that you're choosing to tell me your story by telling it fairly." That type of statement would sit more with someone who's been a victim of a crime. Where if you're talking to someone who's reluctant to talk about [a crime they've committed], you wouldn't launch into it [by asking], "Tell me about the worst thing you've done." You'd just chat for a little while.

GT: Do you approach an interview with a powerful person, such as a police chief or DA, differently than you'd approach someone who inhabits a marginalized position, such as an incarcerated person?

BS: They could not be more different.

With a professional person, these are people who have media handlers. You don't have to handle them with kid gloves. In fact, you need to handle these folks with boxing gloves. They are going to come into that conversation trying to package their message to you. Those are the situations where you need to know the questions you need answers to.

You really need to push hard. There is no reason to pull your punches. In fact, it's your job to say, "I heard 25 stories to the contrary" or whatever it is. That's not to say you have to be unfair. I approach these conversations with curiosity and open-mindedness. You don't want to go into it with an adversarial relationship, but you have to go in with a healthy dose of skepticism and being prepared to push back.

[With a more vulnerable person] the most important difference is making the ground rules and expectations clear. They don't know what "to be on the record" or "to be on background" means. Being clear that they can't see the story before it's published. And then, think about what it would be like to be them. [Ask yourself] how can I put them at ease, how can I ask questions that are sensitive to what they are going through or what they went through

GT: How do you get a sense of whether you're being misled by an interviewee?

BS: Part of that is doing your homework in advance – getting a sense of what their motivations [for speaking to you] are, and what story they want you to come away with, what they are going to want you to think. And if it's a case or situation that's been in the news, read everything you can about it. Learn everything you can about them. Correspond with them in advance, so that when you go into [the interview], you don't have to take their word for everything they say. Knowing their motivations lets you know where you need to push and how hard you can push. It's not like there is any

wrong reason to tell your story, but as a reporter, you can ask better questions if you know what their motivations are.

Sometimes you find things out later, and it's OK to go back to somebody. That was the hardest lesson I learned early on – sometimes you may annoy someone and that's alright. Call them back, ask them to comment.

GT: What was the most difficult interview you've done? What made it difficult, and what was the result of your conversation?

BS: [An inmate] in Texas … is the most difficult interview I've done. He admitted to me that he had committed this one rape. He was serving time for these other rapes he insisted he had not done. And I was extremely skeptical about that. The rape he had admitted to doing was very similar to the others [he was convicted of]. He had this sense of himself as a victim and a truth teller. He wanted the world to feel proud of him for coming clean about the one rape he did do. And I really wanted to get to the bottom of him in a way – that I look back on now – was incredibly naïve. I went in wanting to be gentle with him, because I wanted to keep access to him. By the time I went to see him, we had been corresponding for the better part of a year, and I knew his motivation. So that gave me more confidence to push harder.

He's a human being too. He has obviously complicated thoughts and emotions that I wanted to honor. And I wanted to be fair.

It taught me a really important lesson – not everyone has good self-insight. I'm used to people who have a clear understanding of their motivations and are able to articulate their motivations and thoughts and feelings, and there are lots of people who can't do that. You go into an interview hoping that someone can say, "This is why I raped this person" and lots of people can't do that.

I'm super interested in writing about people who've done bad things, because unless and until we recognize they are humans, we aren't going to stop bad things from happening … If we recognize them as human, we have a shot at stopping violent crime. Because if we understand their motivations, we can stop them. But one of the things that has been a stumbling block is that not everybody can explain why they do what they do.