

Journalistic Research

Getting the Story · By Simon Townsend · 6 min read

Journalistic research

Research is a big topic. But let me give you a few basics. Your single greatest research tool is the phone directory. The White Pages for people whose names or business names you know. And the Yellow Pages when looking for a particular kind of person.

With a friendly persuasive phone manner you will find that people WANT to give you information, and want to pass you on to others who can help further.

Today, the internet is the most fabulous source of information, but don't automatically trust that information, as there are many hoax, ill-informed and WRONG sources of information on the internet. If you are using the internet, you must be patient and just keep typing-in variations on the topic or person you are looking for.

There are some good cheap books on research. I usually mention Abbeys in regard to this. Abbey's Bookshop from which I buy books constantly, has excellent books on writing and research and related topics. Abbey's Bookshop: 131 York Street, Sydney 2000, phone (02) 9264 3111 or log on at www.abbeys.com.au

You possibly want to know about finding interviewees and phone numbers and addresses. Here I tell you about the SIMPLICITY of much journalistic research. It's just about asking questions. A lot of beginner journalists think research is a complex, ritualistic act carried out in dusty university libraries. Here I give you a great, solid base.

ABSOLUTE NUMBER ONE: Always eliminate the phone book first. Don't assume that an important or famous or powerful person ISN'T in the phone book. The present prime minister and former prime ministers can be found in the White Pages. If you want to search all the phone books you need to go to the internet and type in www.whitepages.com.au or www.yellowpages.com.au It can be a slow grind, finding interviewees and phone numbers and addresses. Then you do "the old ring around". Phone up all the entities associated with your desired interviewee. If it's a cricketer, call the cricket club or the major cricketing body. If it's a pop star, call the record company. If it's an author, call the publisher. If you don't know the club, the record company or the publisher, phone any old club or publisher, and ask if they know.

Ask around, ask around, ask around, ask around!

So much of research is about asking around. When you phone Person A and he says "Sorry, I can't help" ask him who he suggests you should phone next. You are asking only for information that is in the person's head. You are not asking him to DO something that will take time and effort. So to get you off his phone he will willingly suggest Person B and perhaps some other names to phone.

Researching QUICKLY is not about looking up books, searching documents and often not about searching the internet. It's about have a good phone manner and phoning people.

Also, type names into your Google search engine . . . the internet is always surprising in what it comes up with. Also, get hold of an annual Margaret Gee's Australian Celebrity Contact Book.. If you wanted to buy one, you could contact the publishing company direct phone (02) 9985 1229 or on the internet at www.mgeecelebrity.com.au But the price will shock you: \$369 last time I looked. I believe it's worth that, because it's a great list. But it IS expensive. The only place you'll find a copy to read free is in some university libraries.

If you see a by-line on an article about that person, phone the journalist and ask. Ask, ask, ask . . . Often, it can be surprisingly quick and easy to find someone's biography, address, email address and phone numbers. But you have to get into the habit of asking around. You will be surprised at how much information people will give you over the phone, just because you bothered to ASK.

How do you find a famous person's agent? Go to your hardcopy Yellow Pages. [Never forget how valuable the telephone directories are in finding people.] Go to the index of the Yellow Pages. Look up "A" and look for AGENTS. Underneath the word, it's divided into Entertainers' Agents, Casting Agents and so on. Then look up the kind of agent you're interested in. Phone an agent and ask: "Do you represent So-and-So?" If they say no, ask: "Who does?" Agents are usually aware of which agent represents who.

Is this a bit of work and inconvenience for you? Of course it is. It's what's called "digging around" or ground floor research . . . finding someone by asking around, asking around, asking around. Asking around is how you track down people.

You'd be surprised who your friends and acquaintances have as friends and acquaintances. "Hi! You know lots of interesting people. Do you know anyone who knows about [topic]?" Your friend says no, but Person C

might. You phone Person C, and lo and behold, her cousin's wife's mother's brother is an expert in the topic, and here's his home phone number and mobile number. Yes, it happens like that if

a.) you make enough calls and

b.) if you have the right friendly, inquiring and appreciative phone manner.

Remember: if it's only information you're asking for, everyone is happy to help nice people.

1. Keep building a contact book. When you see other articles on your topic, make a note of the name and title of people quoted. If they've been willing to be quoted once before, they'll do it for you too.
1. Go to the public relations department. It seems that every topic is covered somewhere by a PR department. Phone these people. They are paid to get as much information as possible about their

topic out to the public. They are paid big money to be helpful to all journalists. Use them to get through to the people you want to talk to directly.

1. Go to the expert factories called universities. They are bulging with authorities on everything, and universities have professional Public Relations departments which can lead you quickly to talkative, helpful experts. Or hunt them down through the uni's website.
1. Use the Yellow Pages and the White Pages directories. I never stop bashing this primary piece of information into the brains of my students from day one. The telephone directories are your most important research tools. All directories, worldwide, are on the internet.
1. Use the internet. It will give you some great leads to experts, but it's slow. You have to send an email, and since most experts receive a lot of emails, the experts might be slow to respond, or they might not respond at all. That's why phone contact is the fastest and most professional way to find experts and get them talking and providing you with fresh quotes, quickly.
1. Finally, remember that you must constantly ask. Ask, ask, ask!!! Never stop dialling and never stop asking each person to lead you to others. Your phone landline phone calls shouldn't cost you more than say 17 each. But your personal time is worth \$189 an hour (the Media Alliance's union rates). The faster you get to your experts, the faster your writing is done, allowing you to move on to create the next paying article.
1. The best researcher I ever had working for me, was a woman named Helen. She had an odd, but effective telephoning habit. She would not let go of the telephone handset until she had found the person she was after. She used her right hand to leaf through phone directories, search the internet and to make notes. But while she was not talking on the phone, her left hand remained holding on to the handset, even as it rested in the phone cradle. This was her self-challenge. It was annoying and cramping to not let go of the phone. But until she tracked the person down, she held on to it. She always found her person.

Reprinted from The Wonderful World of Journalism. Written in the spirit of Simon Townsend's journalism craft advice. Visit simontownsendjournalist.com for the full archive.