

Beat reporting

Based largely on
News Reporting and Writing
by The Missouri Group

Steve Stewart
January 2010

Your beat

Your regular territory as a
reporter, defined by ...

- Organization
- Subject matter
- Geography

Covering a beat

- Be prepared.
- Be alert.
- Be persistent.
- Be there.
- Be wary.

Be prepared

- Acquire background information from ...
 - News archives
 - People (reporters, people on the beat, third parties)
 - Documents and the Internet
- Become familiar with ...
 - Laws governing the institution you cover
 - Open-meetings & open-records laws

Be alert

- Keep a calendar and a tickler file so you'll know what's coming up.
- Keep your eyes open.
- Ask these questions about every story:
 - Who will benefit; who will be hurt?
 - How important?
 - Who's for it; who's against it?
 - How much will it cost; who will pay?

Be persistent

- Insist on a responsive answer
 - Cut through jargon and evasions.
 - Rephrase technical language in plain English.
- Follow up on slow developments.
 - Use your tickler file.
 - If it seems to be a slow news day, you may be missing something. Nose around.

Be there

- Get to know people on your beat. Socialize.
- Do a favor when you can.
 - Swap information.
 - Help people out.
 - Don't get yourself obligated or compromise your ethics.
- Don't shun good news.
- Protect your sources.
- Be accurate (they'll respect you, even if they don't like what you do).
- Be accountable.

Be wary

People will use you.

- You need sources, and they need you. But don't get so close to them that you worry about embarrassing or damaging them.
- You're not writing for them — you're writing for your readers.

Remember ...

- Information is power.
- Follow the money.
- Distributing power and money is politics.

Sources

- Rank-and-file workers
- Subordinate administrators
- Elected officials
- Pressure groups
- Do-gooders (public citizens)
- Opponents & competitors