

## **Generating Story Ideas Script**

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Title page.

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Before we get into how to generate story ideas, we should make sure we know what one is. Story ideas are where stories begin; they're gestational stories.

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They start with what I call "The Hmmm.... Test," which is when reading something or hearing something and it makes us go "Hmm, I didn't know that." It's a natural curiosity that has driven journalism forever. Basically we're saying "I found this little piece interesting. I wonder what else fits around it."

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We can find those little pieces in big ideas – like the tax system – or little observations – like why all three banks in town offer the exact same interest rates.

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What's important to remember here is that not every story idea turns into a story. Sometimes an idea just doesn't have enough compelling stuff around it to become a story. Or we lack the resources to take an idea to successful story.

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It helps to know who you're talking to when you're coming up with story ideas. Creating stories your audience doesn't want is the same as making food your family won't eat: It gets wasted.

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So the first question we want to ask is "Who *is* our audience?" There's a corollary:

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How are they consuming their news? Stories created for an audience that watches closed-circuit broadcasts are different from stories that are consumed on phones. If we want to create stories our audience likes, we need to know how they like them.

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We also need to know their interests. Sports? Fashion? Technology? We want our content to be relevant.

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And we need to know how much time they're willing to spend with you. The audience is always bombarded with alternatives. Will your audience give you one minute? Five minutes?

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Stories are all around us. They happen all the time in a lot of different ways.

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Generally, the most fruitful place to find stories is when we look at the impact a situation has on real people, or the conflict or tension around that situation. But it's all about the people.

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We're in the people business – the business of telling their stories. So when we look for story ideas, we want to keep in mind that our job is really about discovering and detailing the consequences that an action has on people.

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This can be a huge action like the state school board cutting 25 percent out of every school's funding.

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Or it can be a small action like banning sweaters at football games. I don't know why anyone would do that but if they did, there would likely be a consequence to it.

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That's our sweet spot as journalists: We need to report on what happened and why, but "what now?" and "what next?" is where the story ideas are.

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Sometimes it's helpful to think of story ideas as living in boxes. The boxes are story types. It takes all of them to make up a news product. We have previews and recaps, telling the audience what's coming up or what just happened.

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We have investigative stories which dig deeper in the "why" behind the "what."

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We have speech and event stories which cover live things as they happen.

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We have feature stories, which are often about "softer" topics, like how technology is being used or what the hot new shoes are. And we have news-features, which have some news element to them but go deeper into an issue.

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There's update stories "Here's what happened last since the last time we told you about this"

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...and then there's briefs, which we use when one paragraph is probably enough.

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Just like a road trip, once we have an idea, we need to plan out where it goes so we don't get lost. This is where we map out a story: What direction is it going to take? What tone? How long? Maybe most importantly, what resources.

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There's a saying that "amateurs talk about strategy and professionals talk about logistics." It's absolutely the case when it comes to mapping out a story: How many reporters do we need? How many photographers, graphic artists, editors? How long do we need to report it, to edit it, to produce the photos, graphics, the web presentation?

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The Maestro method was created by Buck Ryan when he was a professor at the Medill School of Journalism. It's not for every story, but it's useful when you have a large stories with lots of elements and people involved. There are 5-points to it:

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Take that story idea into a meeting that has all the players – writers, editors, photo, graphics – in it.

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One editor acts as the "maestro" for the project and coordinates everything.

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The story is holistic – all the parts work with and support each other.

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When everything has been reported, all the team members get together and create a draft presentation of the project – what goes where, why and how.

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After publication, the team gets back together to discuss what worked and what didn't.

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Beats are areas of reporting specialization. They're often where your reporter's best stories come from.

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Covering a beat allows the reporter to build up sources and expertise. Those beats are going to cover different areas.

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A professional newsroom might cover things like City Hall, the environment and business sectors. In a school newsroom, you might break it up by covering athletic teams, the school administration, parking problems. This is a place where you can really apply those audience interests and assign your resources accordingly.

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Contact information page.