

Story-Based Inquiry

An integrated process
for investigative reporters

Mark Lee Hunter and
Luuk Sengers

© Copyright 2009-2011
Story-Based Inquiry Associates

1

Why “Story-Based”?

1. Investigate a *story* (**hypothesis**)
2. **Research** and **write** at same time
3. Create **assets** for more stories

2

A hypothesis is...
a story that could be true

Start with a question
...and then **answer** it.

The answer is your hypothesis!

3

Example: from tip to hypothesis


- ◆ Extreme right leader: “Our program is supposed to be illegal, but we did brainstorming, and we saw that the law doesn’t say everything.”
- ◆ *Question: What are they going to do?*
- ◆ **Hypothesis: They are using loopholes in the law to carry out an illegal program in cities under their control.**

4

How to start your research

A hypothesis may or may not be true, in whole or part. So decompose it into separate pieces...

...**chronologically**




Hypothesis:
The extremists are using loopholes in the law to carry out an illegal program in cities under their control.

The extremists make their program...
... are elected...
... brainstorm how to break the law...
... begin to change their cities...
... and opponents respond...
(Start with events you know – hypothesise the others!)

Advantages of a chronology:

- Helps you keep track of data
- Suggests what to look for next (fill the holes!)
- Becomes the story backbone

Turn ordinary events into lively **scenes**:



Detailed description of **players** and **movements** leading to a **climax**

Scene from an investigation:
A scientist discovers toxins in plastic

- Biologist (Ana Soto) puts human cells in plastic dishes in her laboratory.
- After a while she observes that the cells start to proliferate.
- She is surprised.
- Like Sherlock Holmes, she eliminates possible causes.
- Finally she can only think of one explanation: the cells are influenced by chemicals *in the dishes!*

9

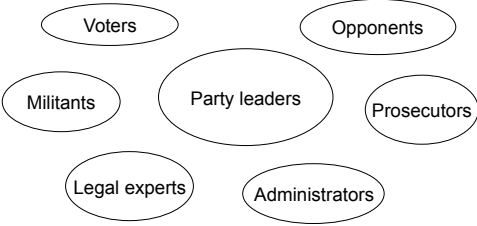


- ✓ Character
- ✓ Action
- ✓ Goal
- ✓ Instrument
- ✓ Location
- ✓ Time
- ✓ Conflict
- ✓ Struggle
- ✓ Climax

“Reporting for story”

10

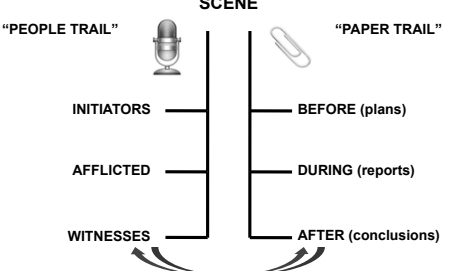
Key tool: Map the source village



Whichever house is open is where you start!

People lead to documents and vice versa

SCENE



“PEOPLE TRAIL”

“PAPER TRAIL”

INITIATORS

AFFLICTED

WITNESSES

BEFORE (plans)

DURING (reports)

AFTER (conclusions)

12

Put everything together in **one file**:
 ...a **Masterfile** (database)

Collect
Sort
Share
Write
Proof
Archive

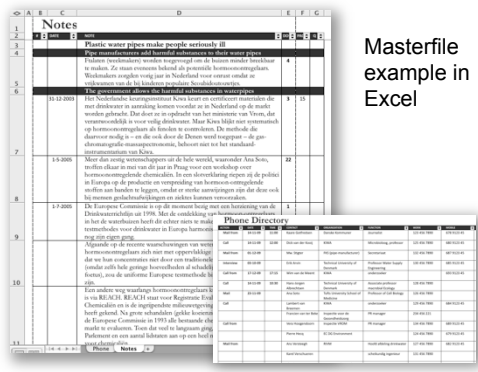


MASTERFILE =

- HYPOTHESIS
- CHRONOLOGY
- SOURCE MAP
- INTERVIEW NOTES
- INSIGHTS
- DOCUMENTS
- CONTACTS/LOG

14

Masterfile example in Excel



15

Masterfile example in Word

NOTE: EU HANDS RENEWABLE ENERGY TO OIL INDUSTRY

23-1-08 European Commission publishes Proposal for a Directive on the promotion of energy from renewable sources. Document written by lobbyists for Exxon according to Source RE1 (confidential): "They wrote the rulebook for the game."

DOCUMENTS

1. Walt Patterson, *Keeping the lights on. Towards Sustainable Electricity*, Earth Scan, London 2007 p. 34

Always enter dates in the same format

Always spell names the same way

Always link dates & names to documents

Tag insights and questions, e.g. with 'QTN' or 'NOTA'

16

From masterfile to outline


Save master file under new name.

Mark key data. Cut the rest.

CUT AND PASTE in order of use.

Key point: NEVER go back and forth in time.

You will "write through" edited file!




Chronology or odyssey?

In a **chronological structure**, events are ordered by **time**.

In a **picaresque structure**, events are ordered by **place**, as actors move across the landscape.

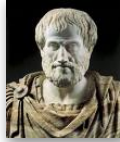
Order your data one way or the other.

Let the material tell you which to use!



Bend the chronology

In fiction, chronology has a **beginning, middle, end.**



In a journalistic investigation, we often begin where we are now (**present**), go back to show how we got here (**past**), then say where it will go next (**future resolution**).

19

The hypothesis = a “nut graf” that sums up the story

“In 1992, a Socialist government capped the salaries of politicians. But they never said what would happen to the money the polls couldn't collect. In the following decade, \$45 million was transferred from the state to the pockets of the pals of those same politicians.”

20

LET THE SOURCES SPEAK!!!

1. People who lived the story tell it best.

Why try to write a perfect sentence when they've already said it?

2. The victim has a right to pain.

If you show yours, theirs don't count.

21

Stop disappearing!

Investigation uses objective facts to a **subjective** end.

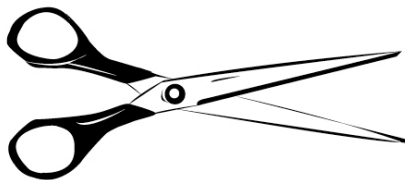
You can tell the audience how things must change!

THE KEY WORDS: **SOLUTIONS AND TRANSPARENCY**



22

How to solve 95% of writing problems:



23

When the draft is done....

- Is it coherent? (The details fit together. The citations are there for the lawyers)
- Is it complete? (All questions are answered, contradictions are resolved)
- Does it MOVE well? Or put you to SLEEP?

24

Don't throw the story away!

- The village is your first audience!
Make sure that allies are informed!
- Keep the masterfile as guide to research
in case of legal attack!
- Keep data as sources for future stories/
consulting!

25

www.storybasedinquiry.com



Slides & Templates: storybasedinquiry.com/resources

26

Thank you!

www.storybasedinquiry.com

...where you can:

- Read award-winning **samples** using SBI methods
- Download this presentation, templates and manuals
- Follow us



- Leave a comment/feedback
- Invite us

And please do not forget to take our cards!

27