

IDEA GENERATION & STORY FOCUS QUESTIONS © Jacqui Banaszynski

Any event, idea, issue, press release, calendar listing, trend, agenda item, dinner conversation, billboard, church bulletin, tip, assignment or hunch has potential beyond the obvious or traditional. After you post your Web-burst but before you move on to the next assignment, or before you dismiss an idea as tired or predictable, use these focused questions to identify fresh, creative enterprise stories: ***

1. ISSUE OR TREND. Does the event of the day tie into something bigger and ongoing? Is it a window of opportunity to revisit an issue readers need to know about, or to reveal how that issue plays out in specific ways? What is the bigger backdrop or context for the idea of the moment?

2. EXPLANATORY. Can you show readers why something happened or how something works? Is this event, issue or trend worth a microscopic examination that helps readers understand how their world works?

3. PROFILE. Is there a relatable character at the center of an event or issue, or affected by it? Is there a “tour guide” to help readers see/understand an issue? (NOTE: Profiles don’t have to be about people; they have to be about character. You can profile a place or an event, as long as you bring its character to life.)

4. VOICES. Are there people who can speak to this idea or event in a way that illuminates it for readers, that provides deeper or more expert layers of understanding, or that connects readers to each other? If you could eavesdrop on a passionate and enlightening dinner debate, whom would you want at the table?

5. DESCRIPTIVE. Is there somewhere you can take the reader to *show* an event or idea or issue? Can you be the readers’ surrogate to show them some relevant place or happening they would not have easy access to?

6. INVESTIGATIVE. Who has power and/or money and how are they using it? Is there a public interest at stake? Do records, reports or data bases reveal a pattern or problem?

7. NARRATIVE. Does an event or idea lend itself to a beginning-middle-end story that follows a central character through plot, action and forward motion, tension or conflict and resolution? Is there a universal or macro theme you can reveal with an individual or micro story?

8. VISUAL. Does a story need to be *seen* to be best understood? Is there an emotional or physical center to a story that makes it best told primarily through photos, graphics, illustrations, video or audio, with words as supporting material?

*** Some notes on brainstorming stories:

- The best creative thinking comes from a disciplined process. Rather than throwing spaghetti at the wall, use focused, purposeful questions to drive deeper ideas.
- Good questions are the key to good ideas, and to good stories. Each of the above story approaches or genres is driven by a central question. Actual stories will overlap genres – an explanatory piece will contain elements of a profile or background of an issue. But for brainstorming, try to stay with the one question and dive deep instead of broad until you are ready to move on to the next.
- Separate brainstorming from production. Once you collect the best and wildest ideas, you can bring them back to reality. Do not – repeat, DO NOT – edit ideas.
- Create your own list of brainstorming questions. Consider this a basic, but not exhaustive, template.
- These questions drive story ideas; they are NOT story approaches or formats. The next step in brainstorming would be HOW to pursue these stories and WHAT SHAPE or FORM the stories might take. Thinking about multi-dimensional multi-media story forms can be both a boost to brainstorming, and a story destination.

~ Jacqui Banaszynski ~

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**Journalistic Jeopardy:
LIVE YOUR LIFE IN THE FORM OF A QUESTION**

A guide to finding stories in everyday life

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Finding good stories can seem like luck or magic. But it's actually a matter of process and practice. Do you have a process for being curious and for capturing that curiosity? And do you practice that process constantly? If you do, you will train yourself to see stories all around you.

1. Curiosity riff

As soon as you've finished a story – any story – create a file in your computer system and type, as fast as you can, all the leftover questions you can think of: Questions you couldn't answer in that day's reporting; questions about the people involved in the story; questions about things barely related to the story. Don't worry about whether the questions are sound or silly – just let yourself wonder wildly. Type for 10 minutes, then save the file.

Open the file the next morning. It will give you a head-start on possible follow-up stories. It also will provide fodder for stories you might never have thought of. Over several days and weeks as you look at the list, some questions will no longer seem interesting and valid. But if any question keeps tugging at you – if your curiosity remains piqued and not satisfied – you know you have the core of a good enterprise piece. Don't delete any question that still intrigues you: It may be fodder for a great magazine-type piece two years from now.

2. Curiosity riff: Part II

Once you develop that habit, start doing the same thing BEFORE you report a story. Brainstorm – wildly – on your own or with some newsroom friends, all the questions an assignment provokes.

3. Curiosity riff: Part III

Now take that unabashed curiosity into the rest of your world. Keep a mental riff of questions running in your head as you go through life. Notice things. Wonder about things. Even if your mental game of Jeopardy doesn't prompt direct stories, it will train you to be ever-curious and ever-alert. Learn to live your life in the form of a question.

4. The story not told

When you read newspapers and magazines, or watch the news, make a habit of keeping a pen and note pad at hand. As you read, jot down questions or ideas that pop out of the news – angles that weren't pursued, people who would make good profiles, background information you feel is missing.

Set a goal of discovering three "untold" story ideas in everything you read.

THE HUB OF ALL STORY IDEAS: READERS

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1988 Pulitzer Prize in feature writing

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THE READER/STORY WHEEL

One way to discover good enterprise stories is by focusing on “stakeholders” – people who are invested in or affected by events. The typical list of stakeholders includes people who have a central involvement or interest in an event or issue.

But if you reach further into the population, the list of stakeholders expands and becomes more interesting. Almost any issue or event sparks some curiosity or interest or frustration on the part of a broad array of people. Plugging into that wider world presents new story possibilities, and helps you imagine the myriad questions readers might have.

The Reader/Story Wheel can help identify:

- the range and depth of interest in a story subject
- stories that might otherwise be overlooked
- fresh approaches to tired or evergreen stories
- story angles that are best suited to a targeted audience or niche publication
- more and better sources for a story or a beat
- more and better questions

A reader wheel is best built with a small group of people, or by an editor and reporter working together. It is ideal for use by a full production team – editor, reporter, graphics reporter, designer, photographer, Web producer. It can be used as a solo brainstorming tool.

It works like this:

Draw a circle in the middle of a piece of paper or on a whiteboard. Write the event or issue you are covering in the circle. Now as quickly as you can, create “spokes” radiating from that hub: list all the people or groups who might be involved in, interested in, affected by or curious about the event or subject. Try to list as many spokes as you can, even if their connection to the central topic seems pretty remote.

NOTE: Don’t edit your thinking at this stage; let your curiosity and connections run wild. The most creative stories come from a combination of a disciplined brainstorming structure and unfettered (unedited) ideas. So try to separate the brainstorming process from the production process.

5. The story not told: Part II

Don't just read the news pages that way; scan classified ads, display ads, obituaries, legal listings, public notices – all parts of the paper. (If this seems like an arduous task, it quickly becomes a very natural habit. Like anything you practice, you begin to do it almost unconsciously.)

6. The friends and family plan

The people outside the newsroom are the people who we write stories for and about. So pay attention to their lives. What are they doing? What are they interested in, worried about, afraid of? Eavesdrop (respectfully) at social gatherings to tune in on the buzz. Ask people about the news, and what more they want to know about some issue or event. Ask them what they wish the newspaper would write about. Ask what matters most in their lives.

7. Get out in the world

Drive a different route to work each day. On same days, take the bus instead of driving your car. What do you notice? What surprises you, or concerns you? Once a week, go to lunch in a new part of town. Watch the street scene. Chat with folks at the diner. Once a month, attend a community event – perhaps something you saw on a flyer at the coffee shop, or something your paper placed in its calendar listings. Make sure it's an event you wouldn't normally attend. If you're a baseball fan, go to the Baptist Church Children's Gospel Sing-a-thon. If you're an avid traveler, go to bingo night at the senior center.

8. Bring the world home

Tune into what's going on in the nation and world and ask yourself: Is there something similar here at home? Or does someone in our area have knowledge of or a connection to this event or issue?

9. Collect stuff

Pick up brochures in hotel lobbies or at road-side rest-stops. Nab "take-me" notices from bulletin boards. Tear items out of the newspaper. Stuff them in a file, and every week or two, scan them for stories. Note things that seem new, or baffling, or that suddenly appear again and again.

10. Nurture sources

Larry Oakes: The Golden Rolodex (Whenever you interview someone, file contact information, date, purpose of talk and a few keyword reminders. You never know when that person will become a valuable source in the future.)

Linda Kohl: The Revolving Rolodex (Make it a regular habit to go through your source list and call people just to check in – not only when you are pursuing an active story.)