

RESEARCH AND REPORTING TIPS  
FOR PHOTOGRAPHERS  
By John Smock

Reporters will tell you that writing becomes easier when you've got lots of good information about the topic. If you're struggling with the writing – stating the obvious or making ponderous statements of opinion -- you probably need to do more research and/or reporting. As an editor once said to me, "I don't care what a reporter thinks. I only care about what he can substantiate through information collected from credible sources."

Good caption writing is short-form reporting. It's important to contextualize the single-image assignment with essential information. In the age of the slideshow, you need even more information to support a collection of images. Here are some reporting techniques that might be helpful in how research your topic and then present your findings:

Think "factoids." Factoids are the backbone of reporting. Factoids are tidbits of factual information in all its forms.

- Numbers and stats are factoids: How many? When? Compared to what? How many involved? How many this year compared to last? How much money? Exactly how many votes?
- Details are facts. Describe the specifics of policies or how it – what ever it may be – works. When did it start? When will it take effect? Who is involved? What is a specific example of it? What are its component parts? How does it compare to other things like it? Who opposes it? Why do they oppose it? What's the impact of it?
- Observations are factoids. Physical descriptions of places, people or things are an often overlooked but powerful tool and type of factoid. What does the room look like? What is he wearing? What is the scene? What are they doing?
- Quotes are factoids (*more on sources below*): Quotes dramatize and personalize your point. A good quote validates broader expositional statements. Quotes should typically be statements of opinion – how the source feels -- rather than fact (its the FACT that it was said that's valuable to the journalist). Longer (and perhaps more fact-based) statements, can be paraphrased and attributed.

Sources:

Good reporting is the bedrock of good journalism and good sources are the bedrock of good reporting.

Sources come in three general categories. Good news stories typically have at least two of the three, sometimes all three. The distribution may change depending on the kind of story – a breaking news story about a fire is of necessity reported differently than a financial story about holiday retail sales figures. Different kinds of sources play a different role in the story. Asking the right kind of source the right kind of questions is a big part of good reporting.

- **Reactionary sources:** people immediately involved or affected by the issue. Victims of a fire. People who are buying less (or not) as a result of the poor economy.
- **Informational sources:** people, often officials, who can give you hard facts about the specific event. Police officers or a hospital spokesperson in the even of a fire. A Retail store manager, manufacturer or market researcher in a story about holiday sales.
- **Authoritative or Expert Voice:** people who can give you a big-picture over view of the issue that your story is about. Academics, researchers, consultants, NGOs. Somebody from Consumer Reports or product safety expert on the fire story (if the blaze was somehow part of a trend, say related to space heaters). For the holiday shopping story maybe an author to speak about purchasing patterns or economist.