

Top Ten Hints for Covering Government

1. Learn the *structure*.

Every geographic area and every level of government has a specific *structure*: Common Council in the city of Syracuse, County Legislature in Onondaga County. Some have a city council with a city manager, in addition to the mayor. Many counties have a Board of Supervisors. There's city government, county government, state government, federal government. Each of them will have departments – such as development, tax assessor, zoning and sewer boards, boards of education, social services. Each will have different responsibilities, powers, procedures and players.

2. Learn the responsibilities, powers and procedures.

These are the mechanics of how the different government institutions work. They are basic areas of coverage, and sources of stories. If the zoning board violates its own procedures (often the law) to give a big break to a friend of the mayor's –that's a story! If a piece of legislation or a proposal gets hung up in a committee, that's a story.

3. Learn the language (or jargon) of government agencies and programs.

Government is full of jargon: unfunded mandates, Medicaid, annexation, incorporation. Start yourself a dictionary of these. But in your stories, always remember to TRANSLATE THE JARGON for your audience. Ordinary people don't know "unfunded mandate" so use ordinary language to explain it.

4. Learn the official players.

Know the names of the mayor, city manager, fire chief, police chief, attorney, heads of key agencies. Know their backgrounds. Know their friends, their connections. Any of these can lead you to stories.

5. Learn the “unofficial” players.

A powerful real estate broker can be a major player in government action on development. Political party activists can shift votes on issues. Advocacy or public interest groups often try to influence government action (take, for example, the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Rifle Association and the Chamber of Commerce).

6. Cultivate sources at lower levels of government, not just the top people.

Secretaries, clerks, police officers on the beat know a great deal about what's going on in government. You probably won't be able to quote them. You'll probably have to keep them as confidential sources. But they can give you good tips to follow up. Remember, often they're risking their jobs to talk to you. So you need to protect them. And of course, you can't produce stories from them unless you've independently confirmed the info.

7. Listen to – and report on – the “other voices.”

Government actions affect all of us. But many of us aren't organized into groups, or our groups don't have much political clout. Single mothers, for example. A small ethnic

minority. Covering government also means explaining how government actions affect different parts of our community and the people in them. And you need to know different people to bring those perspectives to your stories. Diversity of voices and perspectives equals fuller, deeper, more honest coverage.

8. Create your own “beat book” and “source book.”

These can be computer files or good, old-fashioned notebooks (best are those to which you can add extra pages). Good reporters have many, many contacts across the spectrum and at all levels of government. File story ideas, tips, new sources, new issues to follow up. Always have a “rainy day” story idea – something you can pull out and do quickly when your editor wonders what you’re up to.

9. Know – and use – your leverage: “Sunshine” or “open meetings” laws or the FOIA.

In addition to that precious First Amendment, the press and the public have other specifically detailed rights to find out what the government is doing. Some documents, some meetings, some actions can be kept secret. But many can be brought into the sunshine by assertive reporters and news organizations who are willing to use the laws and the Freedom of Information Act.

10. Cover government from the top down, from the bottom up and across the structure.

Traditionally, government reporting has focused on “buildings” or “bodies”: City hall, the cop shop, the County Legislature. It’s reporting from the top down. That’s a necessary part of covering government. That’s how we fulfill our roles as *witness* and *watchdog*. We have to be there to keep an eye on what government is doing – and telling the public, so people know how to hold government accountable and how its actions will affect them. Yes, you have to go to those sewer district meetings.

But government action also bubbles up from the public – neighborhood concerns over crime, parents’ worries about too few teachers, a complaint over panhandlers. That’s another reason for having diverse acquaintances and contacts. You’ll hear about these things from a ride on the bus, a dinner in a local café or at a church social. Then you can follow the story up the levels of government.

And you can also cover government across the structure by thinking in terms of “issues”: health care, crime, education. They often cut across several different layers of government. Often they bubble up from the public’s concerns. Cast your net wide – in terms of contacts, curiosity and ideas.

The 11th Commandment:

Always remember that you work for the public, not the government nor who signs your paycheck.

Resources for Covering Government

1. Government Web sites

www.ongov.net

<http://www.syracuse.ny.us/default.asp>

<http://www.state.ny.us/>

<http://www.house.gov/>

<http://www.senate.gov/>

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/>

2. University Web sites

<http://libwww.syr.edu/information/mgi/>

3. Watchdog groups

<http://www.opensecrets.org/>

4. Journalism Organizations

www.rtnda.org

www.ire.org

www.poynter.org

<http://www.spj.org/>

<http://www.journalism.org/>

<http://www.muckraker.org/>

<http://www.publicintegrity.org/dtaweb/home.asp>

<http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/>