

Know Thy Community's Concerns:
The Elements of an Issues (Community Concern) Story

1. Think of issues stories broadly as:

The Problem

&

The Solution

2. Get a clear, precise description/definition of The Problem – and say it simply, vividly.

- The city does not have enough money to repair a children's playground in Southside.
- College tuition is rising by 25 percent a year.
- The food banks are low on supplies in Syracuse.
- Be sure to ask WHY: Why is this happening? Is this a change from recent years? How much?

3. Understand who's affected – and how.

- *Children in a poor neighborhood will have no playground.
- *Many college students won't be able to afford their textbooks.
- * Hungry people in Syracuse will get less help from the food banks.

4. Look for statistics that show how widespread The Problem is: How many people does it affect? How seriously does it affect them? What can you tell about those people and their relationship to the problem?

- More than 300 children use the playground.
- The average cost of a college biology textbook is \$97. The typical cost of books for a freshman is \$1,257. (I'm making up these numbers, folks. They're just examples)
- The six area food banks feed 3,000 hungry people last year.

5. Find flesh-and-blood examples of people affected by the problem.

- *Children in Southside.
- *College students.
- *The homeless or those who rely on the food banks.

5. Look for folks proposing The Solution(s).

- City officials say they need federal money to repair the playground. A local minister is raising community money to do it.
- Colleges want publishers to cut the cost of textbooks – publishers say they can't. Why can't they? Colleges are asking for government grants and scholarships to help students buy textbooks. Professors are requiring fewer textbooks – and worrying that their students will learn less because of it.
- City Councilman X is proposing a bill to use tax money to subsidize the food banks. At least one food bank is applying for a federal grant to buy more food.
- If The Solutions are controversial – and they almost always are – you need to get multiple perspectives on them. How well will Solution A work? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each solution?

6. Find examples of where and how others have solved The Problem.

- When my newspaper, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, did an investigative series exposing a problem, one of its best editors – Jim Millstone – would usually ask: “Isn't anybody, anywhere, doing this right?” Showing how others have tackled or solved The Problem – and the difficulties in the process – can help your community figure out what to do. That can, quite simply, give hope.

7. Check on the progress of proposed Solutions.

- Okay, so the mayor, the senator, the president – whoever – has succeeded in enacting his/her proposed Solution. Has anything actually happened? Is this just a plan on paper? Is it working? Why or why not? What's proposed for next steps?
- Measure the progress against the stated goals. What was the promise?
- This is part of holding public officials accountable. And it gives voters necessary information in the NEXT election on how well elected officials did.