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FabJob Guide to

Become a Television Reporter

Rebecca Coates Nee

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FABJOB® GUIDE TO
BECOME A TELEVISION REPORTER

by Rebecca Coates Nee

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About the Author

Rebecca Coates Nee is a professional career coach, specializing in broadcast news transitions. Before becoming a coach, she was a television news anchor/reporter at four network affiliates for a total of 12 years.

Rebecca’s assignments have taken her to the Oprah Winfrey Show, Cosmopolitan Magazine, the Democratic National Convention and the Marine Corps Marathon — which she both reported on and completed. She also has covered the United States Congress, the Idaho State Legislature and numerous health and medical issues.

Rebecca completed her Bachelor of Science degree in Political Science from the University of California, Santa Barbara and earned her Master’s degree in Journalism from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University.

She has spoken to dozens of civic groups and other organizations about the television news industry. In addition, she has been a journalism and communications instructor at California State University at Chico, and at Palomar College, and is now a lecturer in the Journalism and Media Studies Department at San Diego State University.

She maintains a blog related to journalism issues at http://www.rebecca.coatesnee.com.
Welcome

Welcome to the FabJob Guide to Become a Television Reporter. This guide will give you all the information you need to get hired in this extremely competitive field, as well as tips on how to stand out from the competition.

If you are a beginner, this guide will offer you the tools and techniques you need to enter the world of on-camera news. We will tell you how to develop the skills you need to be a television reporter and give you tips on how to land the toughest job of all … your first one on air.

You’ll learn insider secrets that take years for most reporters to find out…usually the hard way.

If you are an experienced reporter, there are many ideas in this guide about being successful in your job, taking your career in a new direction, moving up into a larger market and making the transition to anchor.

The first step to finding a job as a television reporter is to take a look at where you are now. Are you:

- A good writer and communicator?
- Able to make any story exciting and intriguing to others?
- Interested in being on camera?
- Eager to make a difference in people’s lives?

If so, you may already have many of the skills you need to become a successful television reporter.
This guide offers you:

**Information** on what the news directors are looking for

**Techniques** for getting an interview with a news director

**Insight** into TV news stations and the people who work there

**Ways** to identify job openings and potential networking opportunities

**Options** for finding a way into TV news reporting or anchoring through a back door

You’ll learn about the most important things you can do to get hired and the pitfalls that cause people to miss out on getting the job – plus a great deal more!

Each section is set up for a distinct purpose: The **Introduction** looks at life as a television reporter and the **benefits** and **personal rewards** of this exciting career.

**Getting Ready** will cover developing your interviewing and writing skills and improving your on-air delivery and appearance.

**Learning the Ropes** details the best ways to prepare yourself for a career as a television reporter: the best schools and courses, self-education and specializing. It also discusses the all-important internship, including how to find a great place to intern, the process of applying and being accepted, and how to make the most of your experience once you are accepted.

**Getting Hired** has insider advice on:

- Which stations to approach for your first job
- The most effective way to contact employers
- Putting together and mailing your resume tape
- Planning your job hunting strategy
- The importance of road trips
- Succeeding at the interview and audition
- Negotiating your first contract
Being Successful gives you valuable hints on how to make the most of your new career and move up in the television news industry. You won’t find this kind of comprehensive, insider information on TV news anywhere else — not even colleges teach this material!

So if you’re ready for a “fab” job that can take you almost anywhere, read on!
1. Introduction

1.1 What Does A Television Reporter Do?

Imagine standing on a crowded convention hall floor with thousands cheering around you. You’re looking into a camera, gripping a microphone and balancing headphones over your ears.

You are getting ready to “go live,” but first you must wait for the President of the United States, who is across the room, to finish speaking. You look up and see the back of Dan Rather’s head — he’s waiting too. He’ll go first; then it’s your turn to shine.

Not all days are this exciting in television news, but few are boring and no two are ever the same. Television news reporters may be covering a political convention one week, interviewing Oprah Winfrey the next and battling a hurricane threat after that. Anchors usually will do their reporting in the studio behind the news desk, but not always. Many anchors also will do some reporting on location or “in the field.”

Reporters spend much of their time away from the station, in the field with a photographer. Larger stations often provide a field producer to help the reporter gather information, conduct interviews and write the story. But most reporters won’t have this luxury. In fact, some are even shooting their own video.

Most TV news stations are staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Reporters and anchors may work an early morning shift from 4 a.m. to 1 p.m., a “dayside” shift from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. or an evening shift from 2 p.m. to midnight. But when a major news event happens like a plane crash or severe storm, reporters can be called to the scene at any hour, with only a moment’s notice.

1.2 You Can Inform And Save Lives

When a threatening situation has developed, like a hurricane or an escape from the local prison, the job of reporters becomes critical. They may even be saving some lives because of the valuable information they are providing.

Since many Americans now get the majority of their news and information from television, especially while events are unfolding, TV reporters have an enormous responsibility to give viewers the facts they need to make major decisions about their lives.
Should they buy a new house now because interest rates just dropped? Which presidential candidate is expressing views that most closely match their personal beliefs? Are the schools safe for their children? Is there a major health threat or new disease treatment they should know about?

These are just some of the questions you'll help thousands of people answer if you're doing your job well.

1.3 Benefits Of A Career In TV News

Excitement

The excitement of a job in television news is hard to beat. Not only are you the first to know about major local and world events, you often get to witness them in person. Although most stations send reporters to cover stories that happen only in the immediate viewing area, many local stations now are sending reporters on assignments all over the globe.

Travel

Tragedies like the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, D.C. or the shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado drew local reporters from all over the country. That means you never quite know where you could end up, from covering serious events like a natural disaster to lighter assignments like a new ride opening at a major theme park.
Meeting People

The people you meet will range from the very ordinary to very famous. Everyone has a story to tell and that is the job of the reporter — finding each person’s story and presenting it in an interesting, compelling manner. In my 12 years as a television news reporter and anchor, I interviewed presidential candidates, governors, senators, actors, Olympic athletes, talk show hosts, singers and musicians.

I’ve been sent on assignment to go behind the scenes of the Oprah Winfrey show in Chicago and Cosmopolitan magazine in New York. Perhaps my biggest on-air challenge was running a marathon in Washington, D.C. as part of a series on fitness!

Recognition

Being on TV also means you are an instant celebrity in your viewing area. People recognize you in grocery stores and restaurants (and usually will tell you how much different you look in person).

You’ll be asked to speak at Rotary Club meetings, ride in local parades and cook chili for charity. I’ve even been in a wheelbarrow race that involved milking a goat! Your life will become public domain. If you get married or have a baby, the viewers will want to see video of the event. Clips of my wedding and honeymoon were shown on TV and I probably got more comments on those events than any other story of my career!
2. Getting Ready

Because of the excitement and glamour of a job in television news, competition is fierce for the limited number of positions. But with the right approach, training and the help of this FabJob guide, you can get a job in front of the camera. This section will help you recognize the important skills and attributes you already have and develop those areas in which you are weak.

2.1 What Is News?

Many people complain that the news they see on TV is too negative and depressing. The following definitions of news may help you understand why so many unpleasant stories are covered by broadcasters.

2.1.1 Unusual

Thousands of planes take off every day without incident and even more people get in their cars and drive to work safely. So when a plane does crash or a mother of four is killed by a drunk driver, this is news.

Crimes, fires, accidents, floods, and natural disasters are covered partly for their potential impact and partly because they just don't happen all that often.

Other stories may have no potential impact on viewers at all but are still covered because of their oddity.

Journalists refer to these types of unusual events as "man bites dog" stories. If a dog bites a man, it normally isn't news — unless the attack was severe. But if a man bites a dog, now that's news.

News is what people are talking about — or what they will be talking about after you inform them. People rarely tell each other about the routine things happening everyday.

Imagine a guy named Joe walking into work and announcing, "Hey everyone, I just drove here and there were no delays, I made two lane changes, stopped at three lights and got here safely."

In some big cities with traffic problems, that scenario might qualify as news, but in most cases, people would still be waiting for the point of Joe's story.
Instead, take the same person rushing into work and saying, "Hey everyone, I just saw a terrible accident while I was on my way here. Someone swerved into the other lane and sideswiped a Mack truck. I don't know if the driver made it. The ambulance is still there and traffic is backed up for miles. It was frightening; it happened right in front of me."

Now people would be gathering around, wanting to know more details. Maybe someone would call their spouse and tell them to take a different route on their way to work because of the accident. Most importantly, maybe everyone who heard Joe's story would drive home a little more carefully that afternoon.

People often say TV news is too sensational because these types of stories are covered so frequently. Many critics often do have valid points — especially when some stations go overboard with "news of the weird." After all, it is tough to see the value in informing people about a man biting a dog!

But sometimes it takes hearing about bad news to remind us to wear our seatbelts or lock our doors. If you understand that you are giving people information so they can make better decisions about their and their family's own safety, it may be a bit easier to cover the tragic accidents and crime stories. Still, reporters are human and you do have to prepare yourself for some pretty gruesome scenes.

## 2.1.2 Impact

From a new drug for heartburn to a rise in income tax rates, if the story affects a large number of people in the viewing area, it qualifies as news.

Nationally, this would include actions taken by federal politicians, breakthroughs in cancer research, the state of the economy and numerous other events that may impact a high percentage of the population.

Locally, the definition of news is much narrower, especially in small cities, which is where most reporters begin their career. You probably won't be covering any cures for cancer unless the researcher or clinic is located in that city.

Instead, you might report on a new traffic light going up at a heavily traveled intersection or parking meters being installed in lots that used to be free. These stories won't have the excitement of national news, but they are still important to the people living in that city.

Likewise, if the county is considering a hike in property taxes or the school board is debating changing bus schedules or education policies, these issues will impact your viewers. Crime stories also have a potential impact, especially if the suspect is still on the loose.
Even national stories can be covered with a **local angle**. How will a rise in gas prices affect local drivers or even merchants? Maybe your area depends on tourism for its economy and now people won't be driving as much. This is significant to your viewers because some people could lose their jobs. City services may even have to be cut if the revenue from tourism decreases.

If the country is sending troops overseas, how many **local soldiers** might be called for duty? There's a saying that "all news is local" and eventually, it may be. Local news reporters will always be looking at how national and even international events might impact their region.

### 2.1.3 Conflict

Many news stories center around conflict: the grocery clerks are going on **strike** because they don't agree with management's policies, one city councilman doesn't like another one, the teachers **disagree** with the school board, some parents are protesting city hall.

Even if you think there's no conflict in a story, there probably is. That's why you should always try to find the **other side** of the story and interview that person or group. There's another saying in journalism that "If your mother says she loves you, check it out." Never take anything any one tells you as the absolute truth. Check it out by looking for the other side.

Covering conflict is important because it's not up to you, the journalist, to make a judgment about who's right and who's wrong or what really happened and what didn't. Your job is to **present the facts** and **opinions of all sides**. Then, the viewers can make up their own minds.

### 2.1.4 Proximity

If an event is unusual and happened nearby, it qualifies as news. Even some fun stories fall into this category, like a parade, carnival or pie-eating contest!

Most TV stations transmit their signal to viewers in several neighboring counties. That means they will try to cover events in as many of those areas that they can so they can maximize their number of viewers. While most cities, even small ones, have their own daily or weekly newspaper, TV reporters will find themselves having to **spread themselves out** over a lot more territory.
If a small plane goes down in a rural area that happens to be in your viewing region, your station will want to cover it. That will require some reporter (usually the rookie) to trek all the way out to the remote location to get video and interviews.

One station I worked for in Northern California could be seen by people in nine counties. I found myself driving more than two hours each way to cover everything from county fairs to the election of a new sheriff.

Although the majority of stories TV reporters cover do take place in the largest city in the station's viewing area, the station will want to have a presence in all the small cities and towns it reaches. They often accomplish this by setting up bureaus in different regions.

Bureaus are mini newsrooms, sometimes staffed by just one reporter and photographer. Some small stations don't even supply a photographer. The bureau reporter will be able to file reports electronically to the main station. They will live and work in the region they are covering and will seldom have to visit the actual newsroom.

Some people enjoy the independence of working at a bureau, but it is also an enormous responsibility. Bureau reporters are held accountable for all the stories happening in their region. That means they'll get the most interesting stories — and therefore a better resume tape (which will be covered later in this guide), but they'll also be on call constantly.

Many bureau reporters will be woken up in the middle of the night to cover the latest accident or house fire. Then, they'll be expected to show up at work the next morning and cover the rest of the day's news. And if that electronic link to the main station goes down, they'll have to get in their car and drive it there themselves.

2.1.5 Prominence

If I went for a horseback ride or took a vacation on some tropical island, nobody would care very much except my family and friends — and even that's debatable. But if the President of the United States or a movie star took the same trip, news is made.
Part of this phenomenon is created by the public's **fascination** with famous people. Somehow the famous and powerful are viewed as superhuman. Presidents aren't expected to chop their own firewood and people are surprised when an actor shows up in a small town and buys a pickup truck.

Celebrities or sports stars also aren't expected to commit **crimes**, so when the accused is a prominent figure — the news media will cover the trial.

Although this type of news rarely impacts a large number of viewers, as long as people keep **watching** stories about prominent people, reporters will keep covering them.

Most news reporters won't pursue celebrity interviews, unless the star is coming to town to give a performance. Legitimate news stations won't assign you to hide in bushes to catch a glimpse of Madonna. They'll leave that to the tabloids and paparazzi.

But if the vice president of the country is coming to your area for a fundraising dinner, this will be covered. This story fits several definitions of news: he's **prominent**, the visit is **unusual**, **local** and may even **impact traffic**.

In small cities, the biggest local celebrities you're likely to cover are mayors, the high school football coach and, of course, your own news anchors!

### 2.1.6 Timeliness

Broadcast news thrives on **immediacy**. Breaking news coverage is what television does best. You can read about what happened in tomorrow's paper but when people need information right now, TV is still most people's first source (although the Internet is creating some stiff competition).

Reporters must be ready to spring into action and think on their feet the minute a fire, major accident or natural disaster happens.

Even if the story isn't breaking, timeliness is important. **Yesterday's news isn't news**, unless there's a reason to advance, or continue, the story. Normally that's only done with the bigger stories — those that are highly unusual or have a major impact on the local community.

**Advancing** a story means updating information, **interviewing** more people, finding other **facts** or taking a different **angle** on the subject.

Unless there's new information, events that happened last week, last month or even yesterday aren't considered newsworthy. The closer to newscast time that the event happens, the more newsworthy it becomes.
2.2 Types Of News Stories

Now that you know what defines news, it's time to look at what type of stories you can expect to cover if you become a TV news reporter.

2.2.1 Breaking News

Again, breaking news is the bread and butter of TV news departments, but in small cities and towns, major news doesn't break too often. What's considered breaking news in a small market (traffic accidents, bank robberies) wouldn't even merit a mention in a larger city where those types of events are commonplace.

Crime

Violent crime will get the most coverage, such as murder or assault. Crimes against children also receive a great deal of attention because all parents are concerned about their children's safety. Hostage standoffs, robberies and even some types of vandalism also are typical crime stories you'd report on, even in smaller communities.

Some white collar crime might be covered as well, especially if it involves a prominent figure or impacts a large number of people. Major drug busts are covered but someone arrested for using cocaine or smoking marijuana isn't a story — unless it's the mayor or a local news anchor!

Most crime stories will be advanced by covering the arrest of the suspect and subsequent trial.

Other breaking news stories you're likely to cover in a smaller market are:

Traffic Accidents

Especially if someone was killed, seriously injured or if the accident had an impact on other traffic.

Toxic Chemical Spills

Almost anything with chemicals in it qualifies as potentially toxic if it's spilled, which means a hazardous materials team will be called out to size up the situation. I once covered a "toxic spill" that turned out to be nothing but shampoo. Gallons of it had fallen out of a truck that was distributing the product. It did make for some sudsy video that we
used as a "kicker" — that's what we call a short, lighter story that usually ends a segment of more serious news.

**Fires**

House fires, grass fires, mountain fires, forest fires. Where there's smoke, there's usually a news team.

**Weather And Other Natural Disasters**

Storms, floods, mudslides, tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, snow, droughts. The natural disasters you cover will, of course, depend on where you're working.

**Plane Crashes**

For some reason, small planes seem to have a tendency to go down in rural areas.

**Court Stories**

Court decisions, jury verdicts, election results and some government decisions also may qualify as breaking news, depending on their magnitude.

High profile or unusual criminal trials are followed by TV news reporters, although courts have varying policies about allowing cameras in the courtroom. Jurors are almost never shown and most stations will have to use a sketch artist if cameras are not permitted.

In that case, the reporter and artist would sit through the trial and the photographer will have to wait outside to get interviews on camera.

TV stations like to cover criminal trials, partly for the information value and partly for the drama they provide.
Some **civil cases** may also be followed, especially if they involve a large local employer, public official or other prominent person.

**Local Politics**

You'll attend plenty of school board, city council and county commission **meetings**. Since TV news reporters are often pressed for time, they seldom stay for the whole meeting, unless an especially controversial topic is on the agenda.

Also, meeting video is considered boring by most TV standards, as are too many interviews with public officials, irreverently referred to as "talking heads" in most newsrooms.

Reporters will try to pick the major issues on the agenda ahead of time — those involving the highest degree of conflict and impact — and do a story around them. They'll try to get video to illustrate the story and interview "real people" (non officials) who will be affected by the policy maker's decision.

**EXAMPLE:**

Let's say the school board is going to discuss changing the time that schools will start. Some parents and students don't like the proposal. The reporter covering the issue may wait at a few bus stops early the morning of the meeting, interviewing parents and students and gathering video. He also may go to one of the schools to get video of students arriving and walking into their classrooms. Then, he'll take that material and blend it with the interviews and video from the school board meeting later that day.

**2.2.2 Education**

From feature stories about classroom projects to a change in education policy, if it affects a lot of children in the viewing area, it will be covered. Schools will want you to get permission from the principal's office before you come on campus and they may have other **restrictions** on where you can shoot video and interviews with the students.

**2.2.3 Localizing National Stories**

This is a popular technique in smaller markets, where slow news days are common. When the tragic bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City happened, almost every local station did a story on security at the federal building in their region.
These "Could it Happen Here?" types of stories can be carried a bit too far, but they serve the purpose of bringing home national stories to local viewers. They also can show the effects policy decisions made in Washington, D.C. might have in your own backyard.

2.2.4 Consumer Stories

Construction of a Wal-Mart, shopping center or other popular retail outlet might get a lot of attention in a small town. Other types of consumer stories may involve investigating complaints of fraud by viewers against local merchants.

Many viewers will call a TV station when they feel they're being taken advantage of by carpet cleaners, contractors and numerous other service providers. Some stations have a special investigative unit that goes after these claims. Many are quite successful.

Just a call from a local TV reporter often solves the problem. Then, the station is able to do a story about how Mary Smith got her $50 refunded after WXYZ News investigated. These stories offer some drama, but most importantly, they help the consumer out, too.

2.2.5 Health/Medical Stories

These are becoming increasingly popular amongst TV news stations and many hospitals are promoting their physicians and services by pitching stories to local reporters.

Reporters might find themselves covering a new heart X-ray machine or interviewing a doctor about a new surgical technique.

Health stories are most effective when you can interview patients as well as the medical experts. You don't want to show the X-ray machine by itself; it's much better to show a patient being given the X-ray and ask him why he's using it. Getting patients to agree to go on camera can be challenging but most doctors and hospitals know that if they want coverage, they're going to have to help you find a patient willing to be interviewed.

Health reporting is not for those who are squeamish, however. I once covered a liposuction and nearly had to be given oxygen.

2.2.6 Parenting Stories

Potty training, the terrible two's, teens and drugs — parenting stories are so common on local news because many stations are trying to get more moms to watch.
Why? Most research shows that moms spend the most money in the family. So, advertisers will want to buy commercials on the station that has the most number of young adult women watching. They measure that through ratings, which we will get to in a moment.

Again, to do parenting stories well, you'll need the help of a few camera-friendly pediatricians in your area who are willing to arrange for interviews with parents and their children. Since many parents like to see their kids on TV, this can be a bit easier than finding adult patients.

Covering parenting stories was one of my favorite beats and now that I'm a mom, I am definitely using what I learned!

2.2.7 Features

People doing nice or unusual things, community events, parades, fairs, these are all feature stories that give the viewer a "feel good" moment after sitting through the serious news of the day.

Many are funny; some are sad, but the best features are about people — real people doing meaningful or even wacky things. Even if you're covering a fair, find a way to personalize the event. Cover the little girl who won the blue ribbon for her pet pig. Or profile the 80-year-old man who is going for his first ride on a ferris wheel. Let the viewer feel their emotions.

Unfortunately, feature stories don't tend to get as much attention from viewers, so stations put a low priority on them. But for the reporter who is burned out on crime stories and traffic accidents, features can be the most fun to do. One of the most common questions I get from budding reporters is, "How can I become a feature reporter?"

The answer is to cover all the above "bread and butter" stories first — do them well — and then keep pitching strong feature ideas to your boss, the news director. I don't know any feature reporters who didn't start out as a general assignment reporter first, meaning they covered anything and everything.

Most small stations only have general assignment reporters. They don't have a large enough staff to assign specialized beats and a feature beat is considered a luxury, not a necessity. That doesn't mean you'll never do features, you just won't be doing them full time.
Even very few of the larger stations have full-time feature reporters. Those who do make it have to be very witty, good with people, great writers and extremely creative.

A few of the best-known national feature reporters are Steve Hartman of CBS News and Jeanne Moos of CNN. If you watch their stories, you'll see some great examples of what feature reporting is all about.

2.2.8 Sweeps/Ratings Specials

Have you ever wondered why all of a sudden your local news stations start advertising "special reports" that they insist you must watch for your very survival? That's because they've just entered their survival period: ratings or sweeps month. The key months are: November, February, May and July.

During these four months, TV newsrooms go into a frenzy because that's when their viewer-ship is being measured by independent research groups such as Nielson or Arbitron. In small markets, this is done by sending diaries randomly to people in different age demographic groups. The people are then asked to record their viewing habits daily. In larger markets, a chip is put inside TV sets so viewer's habits are measured electronically.

When the diaries are returned, the research group calculates the numbers and the stations see how well they fared. The station with the most viewers of their newscasts will then get to advertise their news as being "number one" — until the next ratings period. More importantly, the sales department determines how much they can charge for commercials during the news, based on how many viewers are watching. The more viewers, the more money will be charged.

Having the most viewers is good, but stations usually want strong numbers in their target demographic for newscasts — primarily adults under the age of 44, especially women.

To attract these viewers, you'll see many stories about weight loss, children and the latest cosmetic surgeries. You'll also see local anchors hobnobbing with national anchors, reporters jumping out of airplanes and any of a number of stunts designed to capture attention.

Series and special "investigative reports" are often run during ratings periods. The idea is to hook the viewer on a subject and keep them for two or three days in a row.
Some stations get so desperate for ratings that they run special reports bordering on the ridiculous. One station even aired a series examining whether Elvis Presley really is alive.

And I must admit that I submitted to having laser eye surgery on live TV for a ratings story. I'm happy to say the surgery was successful, I no longer need contacts, and the ratings skyrocketed that day. I received calls and comments about that story for a year.

If you want to avoid being assigned some meaningless Elvis story, be thinking about possible ratings stories throughout the year and then pitch them to your news director when the ratings period starts getting closer.

How can you find out what people really want to know about in your community? Ask them — even when you're not working. Talk to the grocery clerk, the bank teller, the gas station attendant. Find out their concerns and you might just come up with a great story idea!

Coming up with an original story idea is called enterprising a story. Those types of reports will definitely get you noticed by current and potential employers.

2.3 Getting The News

You may be wondering how reporters find out about all the stories they cover. In most medium and larger TV stations, an assignment editor is in charge of tracking down stories and assigning them to reporters. But in small stations, the reporters usually try to come up with the stories themselves. Here is how they get their leads.

2.3.1 Beat Calls

Each reporter may be assigned a different geographic area in the station's viewing area to do what's known as “beat calls” over the telephone every morning and every afternoon. The reporter will go down a list which usually includes the sheriff, police and fire departments and other emergency services. The reporter is trying to find out if anything significant happened overnight. Sometimes they'll ask for a specific person in charge, other times they'll just ask whomever answers the phone.

The problem with beat calls is you're relying on the person on the phone to tell you the truth. Newspaper reporters, who don't have to cover as broad an area and worry about video, have a bit more time to go down to the police and fire stations and look over the logs themselves. Again, broadcasters normally won't have that luxury.
If something did happen that the station missed, then the reporter will have to decide whether it merits doing a follow up story that day.

### 2.3.2 Scanners

Most breaking news stories are picked up by newsroom scanners. These run constantly throughout the day and are tuned to frequencies of local police and fire departments. If a call goes out about a "possible homicide" or traffic fatality, the reporter must verify the information before running out the door. That means calling the agency and confirming what they heard on the scanner. **Never** broadcast information received only off a scanner! Often, the call is wrong or what you heard might have even been a **hoax**.

Another problem with scanners is someone has to be listening to them all the time, or news may be missed. Some news cars are equipped with scanners so reporters can respond to a scene immediately.

### 2.3.3 Tips/Sources

**Phone calls** or **emails** from viewers are perhaps the best way to get news stories. Many people will pick up their cell phone and call their favorite station to tell them they just saw an accident or fire. Stations often **encourage** people to do this by providing a special, easy to remember **phone line** for tips. Just as with scanner information, check out the tip before you discover you’ve been fooled!

Developing well-placed sources in police departments, city hall, or the school district also will help you get reliable information when you need it. If you always treat your sources with respect and honesty, they may reward you by giving you the information before one of your competing stations.

### 2.3.4 News Releases

News releases are the easiest way to get stories because the stories are **coming to you**. But all too often, the news release doesn't actually contain real news. You will have to determine whether the subject matter really **fits** one of the definitions of news.

Numerous agencies, companies and nonprofit groups send news releases to the media on a regular basis. Sometimes these contain legitimate stories — a major fundraising event or policy change. Likewise, many other releases will be sent to promote the company or a particular person. Journalists must make a **judgment** as to whether the story has **real merit** or is merely a public relations tool.
2.3.5 Newspapers/Internet

Although broadcasters pride themselves on being "first with the story," many news departments rely on the morning newspaper to give them story ideas. Once again, because print journalists don't tend to have the same time and space constraints as TV reporters, they are able to cover the news more deeply.

Getting a story idea from the newspaper is fine, if there's a way to advance it with new information. Simply repeating a story from the newspaper is unethical. You must make your own phone calls and do your own interviews — unless you give the paper full credit for the story.

It's always a good practice to read all the daily newspapers in your region and keep up with their web sites. Even a small mention of something in the paper could lead to a bigger story idea for you.

2.3.6 Meetings/Events

City council meetings, fundraisers, fairs are stories themselves but often they lead to other stories. How much money did the water dunking contest raise and who will benefit from it? How is the new parking policy adopted by the city council affecting local residents?

2.3.7 Talk To People

It's worth mentioning again — reporters should always be on the lookout for story ideas, whether they're on duty or not. The only way to do this is by talking to as many people in the community as you can, from all walks of life.

Since most news reporters aren't from the area they're working in, they tend to isolate themselves from the community. TV stations will usually have policies about which type of civic organizations you can or can't belong to — many don't allow reporters to join such groups because of a perceived conflict of interest.

You definitely won't be able to be affiliated with any group that has a clear political identification or cause. But if there are non-controversial service club groups, like Rotary, which your station might allow you to join, do it. Even attending a local gym might help broaden your perspective.
2.4 Reporting Skills

To become a reporter for a television station you will need the following skills, which we’ll look at in detail in this section:

- The ability to **interview people well**
- The ability to **condense complex information**
- The ability to **write conversationally and accurately**
- The ability to **communicate clearly and naturally**

2.4.1 Broadcast Writing

News writing is different from most other forms of composition. Journalists begin with the **most important or interesting** part of the story, not necessarily the beginning.

When you were a kid, if you witnessed an accident and ran home to tell your mother, you wouldn’t start with, “I was walking home on Elm Street this afternoon,” you’d say, “There’s an accident on Elm Street!” Then, you’d go into the details.

We write using the “**Hey Mom**” principle. If you were telling your mom a story, what would come right after “Hey Mom!” Usually, that’s your first sentence, called the lead.

People watching news on TV don’t have the luxury of being able to re-read something they don’t understand, so in broadcast writing, **sentences are shorter and present tense is used**. TV journalists always “write to their video,” meaning they describe what people will be seeing on their screens and explain why they’re seeing it.
EXAMPLE:

This is the car Princess Diana was riding in when it crashed.

Broadcasters also use their first sentence to prepare viewers for the information that follows. Here’s an example of how President Kennedy’s assassination might be covered in the next day’s newspaper versus the evening newscast.

EXAMPLE:

Newspaper: President John F. Kennedy was shot and killed Tuesday while riding in a presidential motorcade through the streets of Dallas.

Broadcast: The nation is in mourning this evening. President Kennedy is dead. He was shot and killed as he rode in a presidential motorcade through the streets of Dallas.

All news writing must answer the 5 Ws as concisely as possible:

• **Who** is the story about (and who will it affected by it)?
• **What** happened?
• **When** did it happen?
• **Where** did it happen?
• **Why** or **how** did it happen? (This is sometimes the toughest question to answer.)

These five subjects need to be addressed almost immediately, or you will lose the viewer.

Broadcast news stories are formatted primarily in **four different ways** and as a news reporter, you’ll be writing all of them. You may have to write one version of a story for one newscast and format it differently for another. Watch your local newscast to see if you can spot these types of stories:

**Reader**

This implies that the story has **no video**, so readers are used as little as possible. After all, this is TV, not radio! Because of the lack of video, readers are kept very short — usually 20 seconds in length. Often graphics are used in place of video.
The anchor will read the reader but a reporter or producer will have written it — or the anchor themselves.

Readers are often used when news is breaking and a crew hasn’t yet arrived on the scene to send back video.

**Voice Over (V/O)**

The voice over has video but no interview, or sound bite. The anchor will read the story over the video. These are also kept short, usually about 30 seconds in length. They are used for less important stories or as a shorter version of a story that’s coming up in another newscast.

**Voice Over/Sound On Tape  (VO/SOT)**

This is a story, usually read by the anchor again, with video and one or two short soundbites. A soundbite is the portion of the interview that is used in the story, which is why they are referred to as sound on tape. We’ll get to those in a minute.

The vo/sot is kept to about 40 seconds and usually ends with more voice over or a live anchor tag, which means the anchor is on camera to read the end of the story. Rarely will any story end with a soundbite.

**Package**

This is the longest format and is pre-recorded by the reporter or anchor. Most packages are kept under two minutes, some news directors even try to keep them closer to 1 minute and 15 seconds. Try reading a newspaper story out loud and see how far you get in that time!

A package is a story complete with video, voice overs, sound bites and usually a standup by the reporter. A standup is when the reporter goes on camera to illustrate a point, make a transition or conclude the story. It the standup is in the middle of the story, it's known as a bridge. If it's at the end, it's the close.

Packages are introduced by the news anchor, who is reading a lead written by the reporter. Then, the tape is either played or the reporter is introduced and then tosses to the tape. That means the reporter has to write two different leads for the story — one for the anchor and one for himself.
After the package, there will be a live tag, either by the reporter or anchor. If the reporter is "live" — on location or on the news set, the anchor may ask them a question about the story. This question is almost always scripted in advance by the reporter, who will then inevitably begin his answer by saying, "That's a good question, Joe." Try not to do that.

**Live Shots**

Once you've mastered reading a script in front of a video camera, the next challenge will be "going live" from the scene of a story. Going live from the field is one of the most difficult things for a reporter to do. You usually won’t have a Teleprompter, you have many distractions around you and you have to ad-lib your information. It helps to have some notes or ideas about what you’ll say, but the most effective live shots look very natural.

Practice “going live” from your backyard, your kitchen or living room. Describe the scene. Pretend there was just a major crime or accident there and tell the audience what happened. Again, you can learn much more from your performance if you find a way to record it.

Because they are so difficult to master, a good live shot will strengthen your resume tape and set you apart from the competition; so if you get an opportunity to go out on live shots in your internship or as a volunteer, by all means take advantage of the learning experience.

Although most newscasts are delivered live, except for the pre-recorded packages and interviews, a live shot is when the reporter or anchor is reporting from the scene of the story on location. The signal is transmitted through a specially-equipped van, often called a "live truck."

Live shots are most effective when news is breaking. The reporter stands in front of a fire and says, "You can see the flames behind me." Then, the photographer pans out to show the fire while the reporter ad libs the story.

Live shots lend immediacy to the newscast and also break up the monotony of broadcasting from inside the studio. Some argue that unnecessary live shots are becoming much too common in TV news.

Does a reporter really need to go live in front of a building where a meeting ended three hours ago? Probably not, but as long as news directors and consultants believe live shots help add to the drama, you’ll continue to see plenty of them. That’s why you need to be able to do them well in order to get a reporting job.
Examples Of Story Formats

Broadcast stories are written in CAPITAL LETTERS with narrow margins so they are easier for the reporters and anchors to read. Copies of the script will go to each anchor, the producer (if there is one), the teleprompter, which looks like a small computer screen in front of the studio camera, and the director.

The director is different from the news director. He or she is normally part of the production staff, which helps with the technical aspects of putting the newscast on the air. The director will roll video and take camera shots based on the directions you provide in your script.

Here is an example of each type of story format, given the following scenario:

You are in the newsroom during the six o’clock newscast and you hear a call come over the scanner for emergency crews to respond to a report of three missing boaters at St. Henry’s Beach.

You immediately call the county sheriff’s department substation, which is located at the beach. A deputy takes your call. Here’s how the conversation might go:

**You:** Deputy Martin, this is John James from WXYZ-TV. We just heard a call on the scanner that three boaters are missing from St. Henry’s Beach. Can you confirm that?

**Deputy:** Yeah, it looks that way. A woman came in here pretty upset a few minutes ago and said her brothers were supposed to be back from a three-day fishing trip last night and no one has heard from them.

**You:** So it’s three men on the boat? Are they all from St. Henry?

**Deputy:** Yes.

**You:** Can you release their names or ages?

**Deputy:** No, we can't do that until all their families are notified. The Coast Guard is starting a search now. You'll have to talk to them for more information.

You thank the deputy and call the Coast Guard.

**You:** This is John James from WXYZ-TV. Can you tell me more about the search for three missing boaters?
Coast Guard Officer: We're pretty busy here, John. We're just starting the search now.

You: OK, so you're confirming the search.

Coast Guard Officer: Yes. We've set up a command post at the harbor. We have a helicopter in the air and three rescue boats in the water. I have to go now.

You immediately notify the news director or assignment editor and type this reader so the anchors can put it on the air:

```
THIS JUST IN TO THE WXYZ NEWSROOM...

A SEARCH AND RESCUE OPERATION IS UNDERWAY AT ST. HENRY'S BEACH FOR THREE MISSING BOATERS.

THE MEN, WHOSE NAMES HAVE NOT BEEN RELEASED YET, WERE SUPPOSED TO RETURN FROM A THREE-DAY FISHING TRIP TO THE SANTA CLARA ISLANDS LAST NIGHT.

THE U.S. COAST GUARD HAS JUST DISPATCHED BOATS AND A HELICOPTER TO LOOK FOR THE MEN.

WE HAVE A CREW ON THE WAY TO THE COMMAND POST AT ST. HENRY'S BEACH AND WILL BRING YOU MORE INFORMATION ON THIS STORY TONIGHT AT 11.
```

What makes this news? It's unusual (most people return from fishing trips), local, immediate and the search and rescue operation will impact the community. People at the beach will wonder what is going on, so they will turn on the newscast to find out.

Now, you and, hopefully, a photographer get into a live truck and head to the beach.
Once you arrive, you see a small crowd beginning to form near the Coast Guard station at the marina. You identify yourself and ask if anyone there knows the men who are missing.

Someone points to an anguished woman and says, "They're all brothers. That's their sister, right there."

This is the **hardest moment** for TV news reporters and one I urge you to handle with **respect**. Sometimes called "The Walk" by people in the business, it's the uncomfortable task of approaching someone whose loved one has died or is missing.

You know your news director is expecting you to get an **interview** with this person on tape — especially if the **competition** has it. But to do that, you'll have to be as **unobtrusive** and **polite** as possible.

You identify yourself and say, "I'm sorry to hear your brothers are missing. Would you be willing to tell us what you know? Maybe someone will hear the story and be able to help." She agrees.

While the photographer gets ready, you ask her to **spell** her name and **where** she's from. She identifies herself as Marcy Meyers. Then you ask for names and ages of her brothers. The photographer tells you he's rolling video.

At this point, most reporters will ask the standard, "How do you feel?" question. Surely there is a better approach. With an emotional interview, I try to tread lightly in the beginning.

**You:** "When did you last see your brothers?"

Marcy: "Monday, when they left the marina here for their trip."

She cries a little. You let her get her composure.

**You:** "Where were they going?"

Marcy: "They were going to the Santa Clara Islands. They were camping and fishing and then supposed to be back last night."

**You:** "What has the Coast Guard told you?"
Marcy: "They don't know what happened. They said weather hasn't been a problem and they haven't had any reports from other boaters of a boat down on their route."

You: "Do your brothers go on fishing trips often?"

Marcy: "Yes. They used to go out all the time, fishing and camping. This has never happened before. They wanted to celebrate before Tommy's wedding this Saturday."

You pause to let her finish.

Marcy: "I just don't know where they can be, I'm so worried. They're always back when they say they'd be."

Now you have the sound bite you need from the woman. Her last statement was the most dramatic.

Just then another woman comes running up and yells to Marcy. They share a tearful embrace, which your photographer catches on camera. The sister tells you this is Tracy, her brother's fiancé. The wedding is planned for this weekend.

You introduce yourself, offer your sympathies and ask if Tracy will speak on camera. She agrees and you get her full name.

You: "When did you last see Tommy?"

Tracy: "We were getting our rings sized right before he left. Now all I care about is that he comes home safely."

She breaks down.

You ask if she has a picture of him. She does and the photographer gets video of the picture. The sister has a picture of all three brothers together, so you get video of that too.

You ask both women: "Would you say these men are good boaters?"

Marcy: "They're excellent. My brother Doug was in the Navy. He's owned many boats. A lot of his friends are already out there with their own boats searching for them. Some charter services have said they'll search tomorrow."
Now, more reporters have arrived and a spokesman for the Coast Guard is announcing he will make a statement to the media. You gather around him and he gives this information:

"At approximately eighteen-hundred hours this evening, the U.S. Coast Guard began an extensive search for three men and their 24-foot hydro sport boat, called the ‘Lucky Number.’

“The men are identified as: Edward, 31, Douglas, 28, and Thomas Meyers, 24, all of St. Henry’s.

“The men left the St. Henry’s Beach Marina at noon on Monday. Family members reported them missing today after they failed to return last night.

“The search is covering 20,000 sea miles of water. We have dispatched six Coast Guard rescue units from the region, and a C-130 airplane and HH-60 helicopter from the Air Station in Gulfwater.

“We will keep searching by boat after it gets dark and then resume the air search at daybreak."

You:  "Do you have any idea what may have happened?"

Spokesman: "No. They appear to be good boaters. The conditions were relatively calm. We’re not sure what could have happened to them but we’re making every effort to find out."

You: "How long will you keep searching?"

Spokesman: "If there’s no sign of the boaters in the first 48 hours, the odds of finding them alive drop dramatically. But we’ll decide what to do when we reach that point."

Your photographer gets some video of the planes in the air over the water and one of the rescue boats heading out for the search. He also videos the last spot where the boat was docked and a boat similar to the one that is missing. You ask the Coast Guard for a map that outlines the search area.

Now, you shoot your stand up.

Pointing to the map, you say, "This is the area the Coast Guard is focusing on by boat and plane. It's 20,000 sea miles of water and extends from St. Henry's Beach to the Santa Clara Islands."
Here is the package and live shot you write for the 11 pm newscast. Any information that may have to be updated will be in the "live" portion of your story. Other details that aren't likely to change will be in the recorded portion.

**ANCHOR INTRO:**

RESCUE BOATS ARE SEARCHING THE WATERS OFF ST. HENRY’S BEACH TONIGHT FOR THREE LOCAL BROTHERS WHO HAVE NOT RETURNED FROM A THREE-DAY FISHING TRIP.

EDWARD, DOUGLAS AND THOMAS MEYERS WERE SCHEDULED TO BE BACK FROM THE SANTA CLARA ISLANDS LAST NIGHT.

WXYZ-TV’S JOHN JAMES IS AT ST. HENRY’S BEACH MARINA WITH THE LATEST. JOHN, HAS THERE BEEN ANY SIGN OF THE MEN SO FAR?

**REPORTER LIVE ON CAMERA:**

NO, STEVE. FIVE HOURS OF SEARCHING BY AIR AND SEA HAS TURNED UP NO TRACE OF THE MEN OR THEIR BOAT - CALLED THE "LUCKY NUMBER."

TONIGHT, FRIENDS AND FAMILY MEMBERS ARE HOPING THE BOAT WILL LIVE UP TO ITS NAME.

**PACKAGE**

(EDITOR’S AND DIRECTOR’S CUES ARE IN DOUBLE parentheses. The script is on the left, the video shown is on the right.)

((NATURAL SOUND OF SEARCH PLANES))

((Graphic - St. Henry's Beach/Tonight))

AS A C-130 RESCUE PLANE HOVERS OVER THE PACIFIC, LOOKING FOR THE MISSING MEYERS BROTHERS, THEIR SISTER STANDS ON THE DOCK THEY LEFT JUST FOUR DAYS AGO.

Rescue plane searching

Marcy at dock
"I JUST DON'T KNOW WHERE THEY CAN BE. I'M SO WORRIED. THEY'RE ALWAYS BACK WHEN THEY SAY THEY'D BE."

THE MEN LEFT MONDAY FOR THE SANTA CLARA ISLANDS ON A 24-FOOT BOAT SIMILAR TO THIS ONE. IT WAS A TRIP THEY TOOK OFTEN AND KNEW WELL.

"THEY USED TO GO OUT ALL THE TIME, FISHING AND CAMPING. NOTHING LIKE THIS HAS EVER HAPPENED BEFORE."

THIS TRIP WAS TO CELEBRATE THEIR YOUNGEST BROTHER'S UPCOMING WEDDING.

"WE WERE GETTING OUR RINGS SIZED RIGHT BEFORE HE LEFT. ALL I CARE ABOUT NOW IS THAT HE COMES HOME SAFELY."

"THE COAST GUARD IS USING BOATS AND PLANES TO LOOK FOR THE MEN IN THIS WIDE AREA. IT'S 20,000 SEA MILES OF WATER AND EXTENDS FROM ST. HENRY'S BEACH TO THE SANTA CLARA ISLANDS."
COAST GUARD OFFICERS SAY WHERE THE BROTHERS AND THEIR BOAT ARE REMAINS A MYSTERY.

((SOT))
"THEY APPEAR TO BE GOOD BOATERS. THE CONDITIONS WERE RELATIVELY CALM. WE'RE NOT SURE WHAT COULD HAVE HAPPENED TO THEM BUT WE'RE MAKING EVERY EFFORT TO FIND OUT."

((GRAPHIC/JACK SKIPER/U.S. COAST GUARD))

FRIENDS OF THE MEN ARE USING THEIR OWN BOATS TO HELP SEARCH AND SEVERAL CHARTER SERVICES WILL JOIN IN TOMORROW.

((REPORTER LIVE TAG ON CAMERA))

THE COAST GUARD'S AIR SEARCH HAD TO BE SUSPENDED A FEW HOURS AGO BECAUSE OF DARKNESS, BUT IT WILL RESUME IN THE MORNING. STEVE?

((ANCHOR QUESTION))

JOHN, ANY IDEA HOW LONG THE COAST GUARD WILL KEEP SEARCHING?

((REPORTER))
OFFICIALS SAY THE ODDS OF FINDING ANYONE ALIVE DROP CONSIDERABLY AFTER THE FIRST 48 HOURS, BUT THEY'LL WAIT UNTIL THEY REACH THAT POINT TO MAKE ANY DECISIONS.

((ANCHOR))
THANKS, JOHN.
This is the VO/SOT that you would write next for the morning newscast. Before it airs, the morning reporter or producer would need to call the Coast Guard to make sure the information is correct and no new developments had occurred overnight.

ANCHOR ON CAMERA

THE COAST GUARD IS RESUMING ITS SEARCH THIS MORNING FOR THREE LOCAL MEN WHO FAILED TO RETURN TO ST. HENRY'S BEACH FROM A FISHING TRIP.

(***Roll video*****)

((Graphic - St. Henry's Beach/Last Night))
THE SEARCH BEGAN LAST NIGHT FOR DOUGLAS, EDWARD AND THOMAS MEYERS AFTER THEIR SISTER REPORTED THEM MISSING.

THE MEN LEFT MONDAY FOR THE SANTA CLARA ISLANDS AND WERE DUE BACK WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

TODAY, THE COAST GUARD WILL USE SEARCH AND RESCUE BOATS AND PLANES FROM FOUR DISTRICTS TO LOOK FOR THE MEN.

FRIENDS AND PRIVATE CHARTER SERVICES ARE ALSO SENDING THEIR BOATS INTO THE WATER TO LOOK FOR THE MEYERS BROTHERS AND THEIR BOAT, CALLED THE LUCKY NUMBER.

THE SISTER OF THE MISSING MEN SAYS HER BROTHERS ARE SKILLED BOATERS.
Notice the differences in the package and vo/sot. The package is more of a complete story, with the human element and soundbites from the sister and fiancé playing a predominant role.

The vo/sot is more of a summary of what is taking place that day.

Also notice how the soundbites are cut down from the original interviews. Details (names, times, dates) are left to the reporter or anchor to say, because they can usually do it quicker. The sound bites are used to add impact and flavor to the story. Jargon (eighteen-hundred hours) should never be used in a sound bite.

Pay attention to how video was obtained when none was available (using photographs and the map). Now imagine that the reporter didn't interview the sister or fiancé. What would this story be lacking? Personalizing the story gives viewers more reason to care.
To learn more about the principles of broadcast writing, there are a few books you can read. One of the most respected authors on writing for broadcast news is Mervin Block. His book, *Writing Broadcast News: Shorter, Sharper Stronger*, is available at Amazon.com or from the publisher, Bonus Books.

*Writing Broadcast News: Shorter, Sharper, Stronger*  
http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1566250846

Another valuable book, also updated, is *Writing News for Broadcast* by Edward Bliss and James L. Hoyt.

*Writing News for Broadcast*  
http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0231079737

### 2.4.2 The Art Of Interviewing

The news-gathering process is relatively the same for broadcast and print reporters. The main difference is that TV reporters must be able to provide video as well. Sometimes people will tell reporters things over the phone that they’d never say in front of the camera. TV news reporters have to become expert salespeople, convincing their sources (or sometimes begging them!) to be videoed.

Becoming a good interviewer takes practice. Try writing a story about a close friend or relative. Interview them to find out the most interesting aspects of their life. Practice asking questions that will elicit colorful responses or quotes from them to use in your story.

You will find that sometimes you have to ask the same questions again and again to get a real answer (especially with politicians). Here’s an example:

*Reporter:* Are you going to vote to raise taxes?
Senator: Well, we’re assessing our fiscal priorities right now and we have found some deficits in revenue that need to be addressed. You know, I personally led the fight in the Senate to lower taxes for middle-income families back in 1982.

Reporter: So are you going to vote to raise taxes now?

Senator: Well, no one likes to raise taxes. You know, my voting record has always been fiscally responsible. I support a balanced budget…

Reporter: So when the tax bill goes to the floor next week, are you voting for it or against it?

Senator: Well, I see no other choice than to vote for it, but I really don’t want to because…

Now you have your story! Senator X says he will vote yes on the new tax bill.

Make sure you understand what your sources are telling you, because if you don’t get it, you’ll never be able to explain the information to your audience.

One of the textbooks most often used for teaching beginning students how to report for both print and broadcast is *News Reporting and Writing* by Melvin Mencher.

*News Reporting and Writing*
http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0072491949

### 2.4.3 Shooting And Editing Video

Even if you never end up having to shoot or edit your own video, learning the basics will help make you a better broadcast news reporter. Digital technology has improved the quality of home camera equipment. If you can afford an investment of $600-$800, buy yourself a video camera to practice with at home.

Learning to shoot and edit video requires **hands-on** experience but here are some tips to help you get started:

**Don’t Zoom And Pan!**

This is the biggest mistake beginning photographers make — over-zooming and panning. The movement of the camera is distracting, the focus is often lost and editing becomes very challenging. Leave the zoom and pan buttons alone while you are recording!
Shoot Steady

The slightest movement will make your video look like you shot it during the middle of an earthquake. A tripod is the best choice, unless you’re shooting something with a lot of action or movement. If you’re not using a tripod, hold your breath and hold the camera with both hands, as steady as possible. You can also find something to prop the camera on or lean yourself against for balance.

The Five-Second Rule

Each shot should last at least five seconds, preferably 10. This is for editing purposes. If the shot is shorter than five seconds, it will be too quick for the viewer to see.

Wide, Medium, Tight

Varying your shots helps the editing process. Instead of zooming while you’re recording, start by shooting a wide shot of the scene for 10 seconds. This sets the scene for the viewer and is called an establishing shot. Then, turn the record button off and zoom in for a medium-range shot. Now, with the camera off again, zoom in again for a tight shot for another 10 seconds.

EXAMPLE:

If I were shooting video of a girl playing with a dog, I’d shoot it wide first, showing the surroundings as well. Then, I’d shoot a closer shot of just the girl and the dog. After that, I’d shoot a close up of the girl’s face while she’s playing.

White Balance

White balancing a camera sets it so the colors are reproduced properly according to the light. Although most home cameras automatically will white balance a camera, professional equipment requires that you set it manually to get the best color.

Cameras must be re-white balanced each time you change a location. The best way to do this is to put a white piece of paper in front of your subject, zoom into it, putting the camera out of focus, and hitting the white balance button.

Not white balancing a camera can result in greenish-blue video that will not be usable. Many beginning photographers have come back from a story only to discover their entire video is blue.
Proper Lighting

Lighting also can make or break your video. Proper lighting takes experimentation and patience, so spend some time practicing or ask for some tips from a professional photographer.

Never shoot into the light. Even the slightest light or reflection will cause a glow that will distort the video. Be aware of light coming in from windows, lamps or signs while you are shooting.

Light should always be behind the photographer and in front of the subject. If you are shooting outdoors, your subject will need to face the sun. Just make sure shadows are not distorting the subject. Experiment by moving the subject. Many photographers also use more lights or a reflector to fill in the shadows.

Some photographers will backlight a subject by putting light behind it as well as in front of it. This can be tricky and you must have light in front for this to work. It helps to carry a portable light on a stand and a camera light.

You don't want your interview subject to look as if they're trying to conceal their identity. You'll be surprised at how much darker the video really is than what the viewfinder shows.

Audio/Natural Sound

Distorted audio also is a problem for beginning photographers. Most professional cameras will have an audio meter, which allows you to check your audio levels before you record. Have the subject speak into the microphone. If the meter jumps into the red space too much, the audio level is too high. If it barely registers, it's too low.

The best packages make good use of natural sound (a helicopter hovering, an emotional embrace, a dog barking).

Do not talk or narrate while you are shooting! Let events unfold and allow the camera to pick up the audio.

The reporter's track often will be paused to let the natural sound play at full volume for a few seconds. Even while the reporter is talking, natural sound will be played underneath the track at a lower volume. Otherwise, you would have silent video, which will look very unnatural. Watch your local news to see how natural sound is used.
Interview Shots

The standard interview is a head-and-shoulders shot with the subject looking slightly off camera, presumably at the reporter. This means the photographer will stand over the reporter's shoulder. Interviews are never shot straight on because it makes the subject look like they are giving a speech instead of speaking naturally.

If you are shooting the interview yourself, you will have to set the camera on a tripod, then stand next to it to ask the questions. You can also accomplish this by asking the subject to look off camera, at your hand, but this is unnatural and usually doesn't produce a good interview.

Extra Tapes And Batteries

Always carry plenty of videotapes, disks, or memory cards (depending on the type of video camera you’re using) and fully charged batteries with you. Batteries fail easily and you never know when you might be called to shoot another story while you are out.

Legal Restrictions

Each station will have different policies about what can be shot and what can't. Generally, if you are on public property, like a park, beach or sidewalk, everything is fair game. Still, you should ask permission before you photograph anyone or their children.

Never show someone’s face if you are doing a negative story. For example, if you’re talking about obesity, you might video a passerby’s stomach without showing their face.

Likewise, if you’re doing a story on hyperactive children, be sure the child you’re showing truly is hyperactive — and you have their parent’s permission — before you put them on camera.

If you’re making a general statement about the population (“Every day thousands of people go to work”), it’s OK to show faces, as long as you shot it on public property.

Once you enter private property (with permission, of course), like a store, mall, restaurant, you will have to adhere to the management’s restrictions on photography.

Even some government agencies restrict what can be photographed and what can’t. As mentioned earlier, schools require advanced notification and some will want you to obtain parental permission before talking to children.
Many TV stations have been sued because they have mistakenly shown video of innocent people or their houses in connection with a crime. Be absolutely sure that what you're recording is correct. If you have any doubt, don't use it or clear it with your news director first.

**Editing Tips**

The process of editing video involves dubbing the portions of the raw video and interviews you shot onto the final version that will air. Digital technology is allowing this to be done on computers, but because of the expense of converting to this technology, many stations — especially small ones — are still using editing machines.

Again, editing takes hands-on experience and practice. But here are a few standard rules:

**Don't Edit A Shot Shorter Than 5 Seconds**

The viewer needs this time to be able to see what is happening.

**Make Sure Your Audio Levels Are Consistent**

The viewer can't be turning the volume up and down based on changes in audio. The final dub should have audio coming in all at the same level.

**Never Create A Jump Cut**

A jump cut happens when you have video of a person doing one thing and in the next frame, they are magically doing something different. This is why it's important to shoot what's called “cutaways.” Cutaways allow you to cut to a different shot so you can avoid a jump shot. They also add flavor and help set the scene of a story.

When a photographer is shooting an interview, they may cut-away by showing the person's hands or the back of their head. This is why you'll often see reporters looking at the interview subject. The cut-away is needed to edit two or more soundbites together.

Likewise, if you are shooting a volleyball game, you would cut-away by showing the fans or the scoreboard before showing another play.

You can also cut away by using a shot from a different angle. This is why getting wide, medium and tight shots will help you with the editing process.
2.4.4 Finding Your Voice

Once you’ve learned how to write the news, you have to be able to present it in a pleasurable, professional way. Few people are born with a natural broadcast voice, but the techniques can be learned. The trick is to speak in a professional manner that doesn’t sound staged or forced.

Record and listen to yourself. Do you like what you hear? Do you sound like many of the anchors on TV, or is your voice squeaky like a teenager’s?

If your voice is not broadcast quality, you should enlist the help of a voice coach or speech therapist in your area. You can find them listed under “speech therapists” or “speech pathologists” in your local Yellow Pages. Sessions usually run from $50-$75 an hour.

Yellow Pages Online
http://www.yellowpages.com

Yellow Pages Canada
http://www.yellowpages.ca

Accents

Accents are very distracting and can destroy your job chances in seconds. Even if you think you don’t have an accent, you probably do. Southern drawls are obvious, but what about Midwestern “A”s or Northeastern “R”s? No matter where you end up working, you should sound like you could be from Anywhere, USA. Even if you work in the South, don’t assume a southern accent is okay — what if you get a job offer tomorrow in Chicago?

Once again, consult your Yellow Pages to find a speech therapist who can help you shake that accent. If you find them pricey, remember that you might not need too many sessions to polish your voice: a speech therapist helped me kick my California “Valley Girl” accent in only a few weeks!

Speak From Your Diaphragm

Try this: hold your nose and say a sentence. Do you sound like you have a cold? You shouldn’t if you are speaking from your diaphragm. Your diaphragm is located in the middle of your chest where your rib cage comes together. Press on your diaphragm and speak. That’s where your voice should come from. It takes practice, but you’ll get the hang of it after awhile.
Enunciate

Finally, make sure you are pronouncing every syllable in every word clearly. Again, your voice shouldn’t sound forced or unnatural, but everyone should be able to understand what you are saying. Remember, the viewer can’t ask you to repeat yourself.

2.4.5 Delivery

The key to a good delivery is making the viewer feel like you are talking directly to him or her. Look into the camera and picture the face of a good friend or relative. How would you tell the story to them? Read it exactly as you would if you were talking to a friend instead of the camera. Following are some other tips for a great delivery.

Know Your Copy

You have to begin by clearly understanding the script you are reading from, called your copy. Maybe you wrote it, maybe someone else did. But if you don’t know what the story is about, how can you effectively communicate it to your viewers? Take time to pre-read your copy and make sure it makes sense to you. If it doesn’t, fix it.

Don’t Sing Song

A common mistake beginning anchors and reporters make is “sing-singing” through their delivery. They develop a pattern and stick to it, whether the story is funny, sad or downright tragic.

A sing-song delivery means you don’t understand what you are reading. You’re arbitrarily placing emphasis on certain words simply because you’re stuck in a rhythm, and the viewers will know this. Once you know what your copy says, try picking out the most important word in each sentence. That should be the word you emphasize, and only that word. Here’s an example with the emphasis in bold.

EXAMPLE:

Fire has forced the evacuation of the Happy Campgrounds tonight. The blaze has destroyed hundreds of acres of land. Officials say arson may be involved.

Some sentences that only provide background information may need no emphasis at all.
EXAMPLE:

The Happy Campgrounds are located at the corner of Deer Run and Cottontail Drive.

There's no need to emphasize anything in the above sentence (but beginning anchors will surely find something!).

Don’t Trail Off

Another common mistake is trailing off at the end of every sentence. Many people get into this bad habit without realizing it. The last word in the sentence is just as important as the first! Record yourself to make sure you are saying your last words with the same strength as everything else in the sentence.

Be Natural

Try to practice not sounding as if you are reading, even though you are. Understanding your copy will help you to overcome this problem, but the best advice someone gave me early in my career: “be yourself.”

I thought Diane Sawyer had a great voice and I hated mine, so I took to impersonating her. Someone finally asked me about it: I couldn’t believe they actually knew what I was doing! I was told to be myself, not Diane Sawyer, because only Diane Sawyer can speak like Diane Sawyer. They told me I’d be much better if I just spoke naturally but professionally, and they were right.

Find your voice and stick to it. You can watch other people to get examples of tone, timing and emphasis, but don’t try to duplicate them exactly.

Use Gestures

Another great piece of advice a consultant once gave me was to use gestures as I spoke, even if no one could see them. Try to speak while sitting on your hands. chances are, you’ll sound stilted and apathetic.

When we speak in conversation, we naturally use our hands. Don’t stop doing that just because you’re in front of a camera. Using your hands will help you emphasize the right words and speak more conversationally. It will also loosen you up and give you more energy.
Breathe

Taking a breath before each sentence will help keep you from running out of steam at the end and trailing off. If you have a long sentence, put a slash or comma at a point where you can pause and take a breath.

EXAMPLE:

The president is returning today from a trip to Europe, (breathe) where he met with twelve heads of state and numerous other foreign dignitaries.

Record Yourself

Many consultants coach anchors and reporters by having them read a script several different ways into a video camera and then critiquing their performance. (More about using a consultant in Section 4.9 “Get Some Professional Help”) The only way to find your best delivery is by trying different techniques in front of a camera and reviewing them.

- Which looks more professional?
- Which sounds most natural?
- Which performance is most energetic?

If you don’t have access to a video camera, at least use a tape recorder. You’ll notice a change after only a few weeks of practice.

2.5 Your Appearance

Watch your local news anchors and those on national TV. What do they have in common? There is definitely an anchor “look” that applies to reporters as well. It’s not impossible to achieve, even if you weren’t born with a model’s face.

The key is not being distracting (being too good looking can even be distracting and threatening to some viewers) and being willing to make any changes to your appearance that you are asked to make. Making those changes, for some (including myself) is often the hardest part of all, but being on TV means you will be judged by your appearance first and foremost. Appearance also plays a large role in getting hired.

“If I had two people who were equal in ability, but one was more attractive, I’d hire the more attractive person,” says Tony Windsor, a former news director who is now a
professional development consultant for beginning reporters. Windsor admits many news directors at small stations put too much emphasis on looks because the quality of work among entry-level applicants is rarely outstanding.

The more experience you have the less appearance might matter, but in the beginning, the way you look will be a factor in getting hired. You don’t have to be gorgeous, but you do have to show that you are well groomed, take care of yourself and know what the TV “look” is.

2.5.1 Hair

Your crowning glory may also become the subject of debate once you are on-air. Like it or not, your hair is one of the first things viewers (and news directors) will notice about you.

Women

I fought the hair issue almost my entire career. The anchor “look” for women is short hair — very short. Shorter hair tends to look more professional, and is less distracting than long hair. You may be able to get away with shoulder-length hair, as long as it is kept very neat and smooth. Even pulling it back doesn’t seem to be enough (I tried that, too).

But don’t get too carried away — one Albuquerque anchor was taken off the air for two days because she got a very short hair cut without asking her boss first! The news director said her new cut was too harsh.

Hair length preferences may vary with each station, but if you are just beginning to look for a job, you don’t want long, college-girl hair to ruin your chances. That’s why you need to cut your hair early, while you are trying to put your resume tape together. Be sure to get a cut that is in keeping with the current fashion — you don’t want “big hair” from the eighties! Go to a good stylist, ask for advice and stick to it, because you also don’t want to have seven different hairstyles on your resume tape!

Maria Shriver was one of the few reporters with long hair.
Men

Men also must keep their hair **short and neat**. You probably will need some hairspray to keep it from sticking out or flying away. My co-anchors became very comfortable asking to borrow mine. Yes, a **receding hairline** can be a negative strike against you. If you **must** cover it, find something that looks very natural. Bad toupees are distracting and noticeable. So is combing the side or back flap of hair over the front of your head. Again, go see a good stylist and get some suggestions. Certain surgical hair replacement techniques are becoming more natural looking. Ask to see some clients if you go this route!

**Facial hair is still a big no-no** for men. Some older men may get away with a moustache, but if you’re just hitting the job market, don’t risk it. And cover up that 5 o’clock shadow with foundation — more about makeup is coming up!

2.5.2 Jewelry

You are not going to a ball — you are reporting the news. Wearing dangling earrings is one of the **most distracting** things an anchor can do. The viewers will watch the earrings jiggle back and forth and hear little of what you are saying. Also, get rid of chunky gold necklaces and bracelets. I always wore a pair of studs, a small pearl necklace or no jewelry at all. When in doubt, go for that last option. Big pins and scarves are also distracting and unnecessary.

2.5.3 Clothing

Watch national news anchors for cues on clothing. The keys here are **solid colors** and professional, well-tailored clothing that is **fashionable but not trendy**. White is not good on camera because it “blooms” (seems to spread out and blur). You can wear a white shirt as long as you have a jacket over it. Solid suits are best for men and women. Patterns are distracting and can even distort the camera, causing a “zebra effect” on the screen. Neatness shows, so get out the iron or visit a dry cleaner, and keep your jacket hanging on something before you go on the air.

Women

You may check with a local salon to find out where you can have someone pick out **the right colors for you**. It’s not necessary, but when I was just starting in the business, I was surprised to hear reds and blues were best on me and browns were out. I had to get rid of a lot of earth-toned jackets! Bright reds and royal blue usually look good on most women and navy is always a safe bet. You won’t go wrong with a good-quality, well-tailored navy jacket over a simple blouse or shirt.
Men

I once knew an older Florida weatherman who loved to wear red plaid pants and peach jackets (not together, thank goodness). He got away with it, but you probably won’t.

Again, stick to safe, solid colors in suits, or jackets over khaki pants. Jackets in navy, black and gray are probably all you’ll need for a while. Just make sure your tie is straight and in style and not striped, overly checked or bold.

2.5.4 Makeup

Yes, it’s true: both women and men wear makeup in TV news. The main reason is the lights, which can make your face shiny and pale.

Men

It’s best to find a powdered foundation that’s not too oily, so it doesn’t clog up your pores. Be sure to pick a color that matches your skin tone. Use a makeup sponge to blend it in around your jaw. If it’s the right color, you won’t have a visible makeup line. You may need to take extra care to cover your beard.

Women

The same advice on foundation holds true for women. Your base should match your skin tone and your powder should be clear. Eye makeup should be conservative. Shadow should not be sparkling or bright. NO blues or pinks! Stick with burgundy or browns. Don’t skimp on the mascara: you may want to use several coats. Lipstick should be lined and fairly neutral. Stay away from bright red or light pink.
You may find it very helpful to get a makeover at one of the cosmetic counters in your local department store. Be sure to tell the makeup artist that you want a professional look for the camera.

**TIP:** The most popular brands used by on-air talent in television are: MAC, Clinique and Merle Norman. Their foundations provide good coverage without being too oily.

### 2.5.5 Weight

It may be unfair, but you'll find very few overweight people on television. **TV really does add ten pounds**, so any additional weight will show and can be distracting. Also, since reporters are on the go most of time, they need to be in good shape. You don't have to be rail thin or get a model's figure. Just pay attention to what you eat and exercise! You'll need the stamina exercise will give anyway, even if you get an anchor job behind a desk.
3. Learning The Ropes

Success as a television news anchor/reporter involves two major attributes:

1. **Performing** well on camera
2. **Knowing** the news

Without the latter, the first is just window dressing. Even being Miss America isn’t enough any more to get a job in this highly competitive industry.

3.1 Become A News Junkie

First, you must have a **passion** for news. If you never watch the news, but want to go into broadcast journalism just to be on TV, you should consider acting or modeling instead.

If you become an anchor, sooner or later you’ll have to ad-lib about a breaking news event. When there’s new fighting in Bosnia and you don’t know where Bosnia is, it will show.

Reporters also **need to be well informed** on a variety of topics. If you interview a presidential candidate who comes through town but you know nothing about where that candidate stands on the issues, it will show.

Some people fake their way into a job in television news with a stellar on-air presentation, but sooner or later their lack of knowledge shows and it seriously hurts or ends their career.

In journalism school, I was given a **current events quiz** every day! The questions weren’t just about politics, but covered sports and weather as well. And many a **job interview** has included a pop quiz on current events.

3.1.1 Watch The News

So, how do you become a news junkie? First, **watch as many local and national newscasts** in your viewing area as you can. When the news isn’t on, turn to one of the all-news stations like CNN or MSNBC. Pay attention to the information, but also **listen closely to how the stories are written and presented**. Sections 2.4 and 4.10 list some of the techniques to watch and listen for when you are observing others report the news.
I can be truly annoying when I watch TV news, especially in a city I’m visiting. I constantly flip between channels to see how each station is covering the news of the day. When you become a true news junkie, you’ll do the same (just make sure to watch alone).

### 3.1.2 Read Everything You Can

It takes more than watching TV news to become informed. Television gives only a small summary of news events. Getting the full story requires reading at least two daily newspapers, such as your local paper and a national publication like *USA Today* or the *Wall Street Journal*, and one news weekly like *Time* or *Newsweek*.

- USA Today
  [http://www.usatoday.com](http://www.usatoday.com)
- Wall Street Journal
  [http://www.wsj.com](http://www.wsj.com)
- Time Magazine
  [http://www.time.com](http://www.time.com)
- Newsweek Magazine
  [http://www.newsweek.com](http://www.newsweek.com)

The Internet has made it easier than ever to stay informed, providing access to newspapers all over the country. An easy link to wire services, newspapers and television stations can be found at the [American Journalism Review](http://www.ajr.org) website:

- American Journalism Review
  [http://www.ajr.org](http://www.ajr.org)

### 3.2 Education

#### 3.2.1 Is College Necessary?

Unless you are a very hot commodity or have some truly unique talent and knowledge, a bachelor’s degree will be required for most jobs in television news. A degree in journalism is strongly preferred in today’s competitive job market.

With that said, here are some words of encouragement if you’ve already graduated or don’t have the time or resources to go back to school — don’t worry! You may
be able to gain the experience you need through an internship or working in radio. We’ll talk more about pursuing these avenues in Sections 3.3 and 3.4.

In addition, although most entry-level reporters are hired directly out of college, many news directors will consider candidates who have experience in the working world doing a variety of jobs. I’ve seen actors, bartenders, bankers, public relations workers and carpenters become reporters. In fact, knowledge of the world outside of college can be a real plus for getting hired. Most reporters fresh out of college have never owned stock or paid a mortgage or property taxes, so covering issues like interest rates or city budgets can be daunting for them.

Even though appearance is a major factor in getting hired in television, a certain level of maturity can work in your favor. Many small stations are looking for older reporters to balance the huge number of young people on their staff, so if that’s you, you may be in luck.

If working in television news is truly your passion, it’s never too late to hone your skills and land a job!

### 3.2.2 Choosing A College

A good college program can provide several critical elements for landing a job:

- A broad base of knowledge
- Actual reporting experience
- The all-important resume tape

The resume tape will be covered in more detail later in this guide. You won’t be able to get a job without one!
When deciding between colleges, it would be worthwhile to find one that allows students to report for a campus TV or radio station or even a professional one. Look into and compare a number of programs before you decide. You can keep a chart of the pros and cons of each to help you compare them at a glance.

If you’ve already completed your degree but did not study journalism, you may be able to enroll in some night courses on writing or broadcasting at your local community college. Be wary of vocational schools or correspondence courses offering to teach you “how to have a career in broadcasting.” These courses usually do not provide the type of hands-on experience you will need. You can get much better training by working for free at a TV station through an internship, which will be covered in detail in Section 3.3 of this guide.

A master’s degree is not necessary to get a job in television news, but it can be helpful if you did not study journalism as an undergraduate.

I earned my bachelor’s degree in political science, which was a good background for political reporting. But I soon discovered I didn’t have any formal training in writing for print or broadcast. Even if you were an English major, news writing is an entirely different species. That’s why I enrolled in the graduate program at Northwestern’s Medill School of Journalism. Not only did I get great hands-on experience, I also graduated with a high-quality resume tape.

Respected Programs

One of the most respected broadcast journalism programs is at the University of Missouri, where students actually staff the local NBC affiliate. My alma mater, Northwestern University, runs its own news bureau in Washington, D.C., which is staffed only by Northwestern graduate students.

For three months, I was the Washington correspondent for a client station in Peoria, Illinois. My reports, complete with me standing in front of Capitol Hill, were fed by satellite several times a week to the station and aired on their evening newscasts. So, I played in Peoria without ever having been there!

Other well-known programs for broadcasting are at the University of Florida, Washington State and Syracuse University.

University of Missouri Broadcast News program
http://www.journalism.missouri.edu

Northwestern University Medill School of Journalism
http://www.medill.northwestern.edu
If you’re in Canada, the Canadian Journalism Project maintains a list of journalism schools and programs across Canada on their website. They also have a variety of other interesting resources and articles you can read. Check out their “Resource Center” section, for example.


Be wary of colleges offering majors in communications or speech. These programs often focus on listening skills and speech patterns and will be of little value to your career. Journalism programs usually concentrate more on writing and reporting skills, teaching you tools you’ll actually use. A broadcast journalism program is preferable, but a good foundation also can be laid by working for your college newspaper, as I did.

### 3.2.3 Consider A Specialty

Since most entry-level jobs are for general assignment reporters, getting a broad base of knowledge is important. You never know what story you might be sent out on next! You could be covering a city council meeting one day and a court case after that. That means you’ll need to understand the workings of local government and the court system.

In addition, many medium-sized and larger stations are also advertising for specialty reporters. Specializing might open some doors for you later in your career, especially if you have a particular area of interest such as entertainment reporting.

Two hot areas right now are consumer and health reporting. Some people like to call themselves “investigative” reporters, but many in the industry find that term insulting. Aren’t all reporters investigative reporters? (The same is true for “human interest” stories. Aren’t all stories of interest to humans? They’d better be!) You might consider taking some business courses if you’re interested in consumer news. Likewise, science and health classes would help you in medical reporting. Self-study is also
helpful, but be prepared to demonstrate what you know because you won’t have a piece of paper to prove yourself.

3.2.4 Weather And Sports Reporting

Weather and sports reporting are two other “specialty” options you can consider.

In past years, an entertaining personality often was enough to become a weathercaster, especially in areas where the weather doesn’t change much, like California. Volatile weather regions like Florida usually have relied on certified meteorologists to report on their weather.

Although many famous weathercasters such as Al Roker and Willard Scott do not have a formal education in meteorology, meteorologists certified by the American Meteorological Society are becoming more in demand. In fact, most stations, even smaller ones, are now requiring their weathercasters to at least be qualified for certification, if not certified.

Getting AMS certification requires an educational background in science and the completion of some AMS courses. You can find out more about AMS certification through their website.

American Meteorological Society
http://www.ametsoc.org

Another way to become a certified weathercaster, if you don’t have a degree in meteorology, is to get a seal from the National Weather Association. This may be an easier route for beginning weathercasters.

National Weather Association
http://www.nwas.org

Sportscasting is an extremely competitive field to enter. In smaller markets, the sports anchor also does his or her reporting, although there also may be one more sports reporter who anchors on the weekends. That means most small market stations will
only have two positions for sports. Sports reporters often earn their stripes by news reporting and covering sports events on the side.

Again, **knowledge is the key** to getting hired…and not just about football and basketball. How much do you know about hockey, tennis, swimming, track, soccer and golf? You’ll need to learn about these sports and whatever else is popular where you end up working.

Many of the larger stations and networks are hiring former athletes, not journalists, to do their commentaries. Comedian **Dennis Miller** was even hired by ABC to co-host **Monday Night Football**. Women are beginning to enter this field, but the opportunities are still very limited, especially in smaller markets, which tend to be more traditional.

Since there is no required certification in the study of “sports,” an education in journalism is the best bet for sports reporters, and **self-study** on the topic is essential. Sports anchor/reporters in small markets usually are one-man bands, meaning they shoot and edit their own video tape, so **learning photography** is also a must for this position.

### 3.3 Internships

Most television news reporters/anchors have worked for free at some point early in their career. A good internship is the **best possible way to build your resume tape**, and the ideal internship will allow you to do some actual reporting. Internships differ in length — some last three months, while others may last up to one year, or until you land a paying job in the industry. If the news director **likes** you, your internship will likely last longer.

Be aware that in some internships at stations in big cities or networks you will be merely a “**gopher**,” with no chance of getting any reporting experience. Interning at a network might seem exciting, but it probably won’t help you build the all-important resume tape: your key to getting hired.

> “Internships are really critical. Few schools are turning out applicants who are ready to get into their first jobs.”
> —Gary Gunter, *KRCR-TV News Director, Redding, California*

Gunter says he sees many young applicants who are proud of the fact that they interned at a big station in Los Angeles or San Francisco, but their internship consisted of **logging tapes** and **setting up appointments** for reporters. “None of that is going to help you right here because you are a one-woman or one-man band here in Redding, California.”
That means you must learn how to shoot a video camera, edit video, write and report. An internship at a small station located near you will give you a much better chance to do some actual reporting, plus it will provide a more realistic picture of your future working conditions. Very few people land their first job in a large newsroom.

“A lot of kids make a big mistake by going to big markets and getting an internship. Go to the very smallest station you can find. You might even get to anchor one night.”

— Dave Kirby, former news director in six small- to medium-sized markets

In fact, Kirby tells the story of one intern who worked for him at a station in Dothan, Alabama. When everyone else called in sick, he had no choice but to put the intern on the air to anchor the 10 o’clock newscast. She did so well that he offered her a full-time reporting job on the spot!

### 3.3.1 Finding An Internship

If you are in school, one of the best ways to get a good internship is through your college program. Most quality broadcast journalism programs either have their own campus radio or TV stations or provide students access to a local cable station or news bureau.

**TIP:** Even if you work for a campus TV station, try to get an internship at a professional station. You need to see how a real newsroom functions before you start applying for jobs in one. Most campus stations do not operate under the same deadline constraints and structure as professional broadcast stations.

If you’re not a student, apply to the small stations closest to you. Policies on internships vary with each station, but most small stations need help and they’ll gladly take it for free. Make sure that you will be getting the hands-on experience you want before you agree to work for them.

### The Stations

Chances are you live near at least three network affiliate stations, maybe even four. These stations run programming from CBS, NBC, ABC or FOX, and are tied to their network through a contract. Most (with a few exceptions) are not owned by their network, but by big media companies like the *New York Times*, or a local group or family. Most also run their own local news programs.
Internship opportunities will vary at the affiliate stations depending on the size of the station. Actually, the bigger the station, the greater the opportunity for an internship existing, but as mentioned previously the odds that you’ll get an on-camera internship here are very small. Most major market internships involve getting coffee for anchors, running Teleprompters or delivering video tapes.

The only way you can get a resume tape out of this type of internship is to convince some nice photographer to help you make a “dummy” tape. This means your story will never air, but you can demonstrate how you would perform in front of a camera. Weekends, which are usually understaffed, will be your best chance to shoot a practice resume tape.

Many larger stations also have strict policies or union rules against letting interns go out into the field (even for practice), so you may have to be persistent with management to give you an opportunity. Again, it’s best to find a smaller station, where you’ll have a much better chance of doing some actual reporting.

Many cable stations are popping up in various-sized markets all over the country. They are not affiliated with any major networks and run syndicated programming or re-runs of popular older shows. Some of them are beginning to add short news briefs to their programming. For a list of their affiliates state-by-state, visit their websites.

In addition, locally owned cable companies sometimes provide news briefs and public access stations where people can produce their own programming. Volunteering to help with one of these programs may be a good opportunity for you to have access to equipment, and even shoot some stories yourself.

The pay at cable companies or cable stations in smaller cities usually isn’t enough to attract someone with much experience, so cable may give you a chance to try your skills in front of the camera.

Most stations, even the smaller ones, now have their own websites, complete with bios on anchors and reporters who work there. Again, the American Journalism Review provides direct links to numerous stations across the country.

Find a station you’d like to work for and check out the backgrounds of the people who have jobs there.

- What school did they attend?
- Where did they intern?
- Where did they get their first on-air job?
By reviewing these bios you might get some good leads on solid internships or stations that are willing to hire entry-level reporters.

American Journalism Review  
http://www.ajr.org

Professional Organizations

Some professional organizations also offer internships. A number of internships are available for minority students as part of an ongoing effort to attract more people of color into broadcasting. A few of the better-known organizations offering internships and scholarships include the following (visit their websites to learn more):

National Association of Broadcasters  
http://www.nab.org

National Association of Black Journalists  
http://www.nabj.org

Asian American Journalists Association  
http://www.aaja.org

National Association of Hispanic Journalists  
http://www.nahj.org

Minorities in Broadcasting Training Program  
http://www.thebroadcaster.com

Alliance for Women in Media  
http://www.awrt.org

Society of Professional Journalists  
http://www.spj.org

3.3.2 Applying For An Internship

You should apply for an internship in the same way you would for an actual job in TV news, except you probably won’t have a resume tape to help you out.

Find out who the news director is and send them a creative cover letter and resume (Section 4.6 of this guide will help you put these together). Tell the news director why you are interested in becoming an intern and emphasize your willingness to work
any shift, any days and any hours for free! The more enthusiasm you can show, the better.

Even if you have a full-time job that you must keep to meet expenses, you may be able to intern during a night or weekend shift, when the staffing is generally weak. You’ll also get a much better opportunity to cover news stories during these shifts because fewer reporters will be on duty.

A week after you’ve sent your material, call the news director directly (see the hints on when to call in Section 4.7). Ask if you can come by to talk with him or her about internship opportunities. Again, enthusiasm counts. Explain why this has always been your dream job and what you’re willing to do to get it. News directors are looking for interns who will pinch-hit in any situation: answering phones, editing video, shooting a story and eventually reporting. Tell them that no job is beneath you and you want to learn every aspect of television news.

During the interview, make it clear that you would like an opportunity to put a resume tape together and ask whether this might be possible. If the answer is negative, find a different station.

**TIP:** If the station pays overtime to its reporters, you may have a better shot at covering good news stories. Sometimes small stations send reporters home to avoid spending too much money on overtime pay, and the intern may be the one who gets to stay for the fire, flood or murder. Overtime pay is not the deciding factor in choosing an internship, but may be something to consider. See if you can subtly find this out.

### 3.3.3 Making The Most Of Your Internship

Your internship is much more than just a training opportunity; it’s a real live audition for your career. The people you work with will be in a position to make or break your future in the business, because employers will surely track them down as references. Here are some strategies to maximize the value of your internship in every respect.

Try to strike up relationships with everyone: the news director, anchors, reporters, producers, photographers, editors and the production staff (directors, graphics operators and studio camera crews).
In particular, the production staff will be very valuable in helping you put a resume tape together, either by providing graphics or setting up a mock newscast for you to anchor. The only way you’ll get a mock newscast on video is if you treat the production staff very nicely from the start. They will be doing you a very big favor if they agree to stage a newscast for your tape.

Almost all anchors, reporters, producers and news directors like to be asked for their opinion. None of them like an intern who comes in and acts as if they already know everything. Be humble and willing to learn all aspects of putting a newscast together.

Help out, even when you aren’t asked. Many interns sit around for a while until the news director finds something for them to do. Volunteer to go out with photographers and learn to shoot. Offer to write wire stories for the producers. Try field producing stories for reporters: help them make calls, set up interviews and even go out on a few of those interviews yourself.

If you are having trouble getting permission to do stories on your own, keep after the news director until you get that opportunity. Sometimes they get so busy that they just forget about the intern. You have to keep reminding them!

Once you begin reporting, ask your news director what he or she thought of your story immediately after it airs. Try to arrange a meeting with the news director at least every other week to review your stories and ask for feedback. Take the criticism seriously and gracefully.

Ask any veteran anchor or reporters to watch your tape with you as well. Don’t be overly demanding of their time and pick a good time to ask – not just before a newscast. They may actually be flattered that you’ve come to them for advice.

You need to get a lot of feedback as early and often as possible so you can make changes in your reporting before your internship ends. Put a few of your stories on a tape and send it to other news directors or take it to professional conferences to be critiqued (more on doing this is in Section 4.8). Once your internship is over, it will be too late to make these changes for your resume tape. Early critiques are crucial.

When it comes time to put your final resume tape together — either because you’re applying for a job opening or your internship is ending — go back to the news director and other contacts you have made at the station for advice on which stories to use. Many news directors are happy to help interns who have worked hard for them, but if you slack off during your internship, don’t expect much assistance when it comes time to make a tape.
3.4 Other Experience To Boost Your Resume

3.4.1 Radio

You’ll increase your chances of getting accepted for an internship or an entry-level job if you’ve already started working in radio. Radio is a great way to get early training in broadcasting. You’ll learn **how to talk on-air, ad lib and control your voice** – all without the distraction of being on camera. Reporting on camera is like walking and chewing gum at the same time. It usually helps to know how to walk first! Radio can teach you how to walk.

If you’re not at a college with a campus radio station, try knocking on doors at some of the **professional stations in your community**. Unless you’re in a very large city, most stations are eager to find someone who can work odd shifts (overnights), so not as much experience is required.

If you do work for a radio station, see if you can **read and write some news briefs** as well, instead of just playing music. This will help you learn how to condense wire copy and get ready for your career as a news reporter.

3.4.2 Acting

As much as journalists hate to admit it, a certain amount of acting is involved in **delivering the news**. You should never make anything up (that’s a great way to get yourself fired), but you do **have to sound convincing and energetic** to the audience, even if you just broke up with someone or are coming down with the flu.

A **drama class** or **acting coach** might help you improve your self-confidence and presentation skills including voice and movement. To find a class or coach near you, contact your community college or local theatre troupe, or look in the Yellow Pages under “Drama Schools.”

3.4.3 Public Speaking

Joining your local chapter of **Toastmasters** (the popular speech club) would also be helpful for future news reporters or anchors. Visit their website to learn more about the organization and to find a chapter near you.
In general, take as many opportunities as you can to speak in public. It’s one of the hardest things to do, but if you can’t speak in public, you’ll find it very difficult and intimidating to be in front of a camera. Experience is the only thing that will help you overcome your fears.

Even the most seasoned television veterans will still tell you they get nervous before some newscasts. I was often asked if I got nervous before a show. After 12 years, I didn’t always feel the jitters, but if we had breaking news or another tricky situation, they definitely came. Don’t worry about being nervous in the beginning, especially if you are auditioning for a job. Instead, use the energy your adrenaline is giving you to help you deliver a powerful performance.
4. Getting Hired

Landing your first job in television news requires persistence and a well-developed plan. Here are the things to consider and the steps to follow to get yourself that elusive first job and overcome the “No experience? No job!” catch-22 that exists for the majority of desirable occupations.

You will learn:

- A bit about the market today
- How to get the attention of a news director
- How to make connections in the industry
- How to get some professional help if you need it
- How to ace your interview
- The steps to take once you’ve been offered a job.

Finally, we’ll look at some creative and unconventional ways to use your experience and natural abilities to break into TV journalism. You can do it!

4.1 The Jobs

The personnel breakdown at local news stations is usually done the following way:

**General Manager** In charge of all departments, including news, sales, production and programming.

**News Director** In charge of the news department, handles most of the hiring.

**Anchors** Deliver newscasts, some also report and help write.

**Reporters** Cover and write stories.
Producers
Write, organize and time newscasts.

Photographers
Shoot and edit stories.

Tape Editors
Edits video from national and other feeds.

Most larger stations have assistant news directors and executive producers who are also part of the management staff. Some smaller stations will have reporters shoot their own video and anchors produce their own newscasts.

At my first job in Redding, California I shot and wrote three to five stories a day, edited them and anchored the 6:30 p.m. newscast. My co-anchor was the news director.

The technical or production staff includes:

- Directors
- Graphic artists
- Studio camera operators

They are responsible for the technical aspects of getting the newscast on the air and are not members of the news department.

It’s been said newscasts are like an airplane: the producer builds it, the director flies it…and sometimes, they do crash!

Reporting Or Anchoring?

Getting an anchor position is more difficult than getting a reporting job because the competition is greater, the positions are fewer and more experience is generally required. Some small stations will hire anchors who have no professional experience, but many news directors caution against reporters moving too quickly into the anchor chair.

Reporters should get a solid foundation in the field before settling into the studio. Lack of experience does tend to show even if you’re reading from a script. Anchors often must ask questions of live guests and ad-lib during breaking news events. If they haven’t paid their dues as a reporter, they will have a tough time dealing with these situations.
“You get in faster, you fall faster,” says a former news director and now a leading industry consultant. Michael Castengera says anchoring too early in a career is the biggest mistake beginning reporters make.

“They move too fast — move into the anchor chair before they understand what’s involved. If they don’t have sound grounding, it will show,” he says. Castengera also says the same principle is true for reporters who try to jump to bigger stations before they’re ready. Eventually, their lack of experience will catch up with them. Because they don’t have a solid foundation, they could make a critical error in judgment and end up getting fired.

If you really love the idea of becoming an anchor, the best way to break into it is by doing a combination of both anchoring and reporting.

This can be done a number of ways: noon and morning anchors usually report during the rest of the day, and weekend anchors will report three days during the week. Otherwise, you may have a chance at filling in when an anchor is gone. Some news directors do not allow reporters to substitute for anchors, so if you want to be an anchor be sure to know the news director’s policy before you take a reporting job instead.

Anchors in large markets may pull in a six-figure salary, but remember that if ratings fall, the anchors are the first to be blamed. Be prepared to take the risk of being a scapegoat for bad ratings, and consider having a solid background as a reporter as your safety net!

4.2 The Markets

Every region of the country is divided into a television market that is ranked according to its population and estimated number of households with televisions. Currently, there are 210 markets in the United States, including Alaska and Hawaii. The bigger the market size, the lower the ranking number. New York City is Market #1 with nearly seven and a half million TV households. Glendive, Montana (population 4,800) is the smallest market at #210.

The top ten markets in the U.S. are as follows:

1. New York
2. Los Angeles
3. Chicago
4. Philadelphia
5. Dallas-Ft. Worth
6. San Francisco-Oakland-San Jose
7. Boston
8. Atlanta
9. Washington D.C.
10. Houston

A complete list of the TV market rankings is available at the Nielsen Media and Entertainment website, in the "Television" section; look for the DMA (Designated Market Area) Ranks link.

**Nielsen Media and Entertainment**

One of the best annual guides to stations and markets is the **Guide to North American Media** published by the National Association of Television Program Executives (NATPE).

The guide lists addresses, phone numbers and **key contacts for most stations in the country**. Non-NATPE members can purchase their **Guide to North American Media** for $175. It is a worthwhile investment for any job seeker—just be sure to double check the information to make sure it is current before you send a tape or resume. Like coaches in professional athletics, news directors are not known for their longevity. Also, guard your station guide carefully! Many disappear the minute they land in a newsroom.

**Guide to North American Media**
http://www.natpe.org/store/publications

Markets with a **ranking higher than 100** are considered “small.” “Medium” markets are generally **between 40-100** and the **top 40** markets are “big.” While the goal of many TV reporters and anchors will be to get a job in a top-40 market, nearly all entry-level job seekers will start in a small market, and this is where your efforts should be focused. Even a truly exceptional talent may spend **two to three years** in a small market before jumping to a medium or large market.
Anchors have a more difficult time jumping market sizes because they don’t leave their jobs as often as reporters, especially in the larger markets. The same anchors I grew up watching in Los Angeles are still there, although they switch stations from time to time.

Anchors and reporters in smaller markets generally wear many hats. Some will shoot their own video and produce their own newscasts. But not all small stations operate the same way: you might find one station in Market 130 that has photographers and another in Market 110 that doesn’t. That’s why market size isn’t all that matters as you begin your job search.

### 4.3 The Stations To Target

The first stations to target are those affiliated with a major network: CBS, ABC, NBC and FOX. These stations are usually more stable than smaller, independent stations. Stations have their own rankings within each market. The station that gets the most viewers, or highest ratings, is considered the number one station in the market.

In some markets there is no clear number one station, in others there’s a station that’s been a dominant force for many years.

Although it’s always nice to work for a number one station, stations that are in second or third place may pay more and try harder. The station’s reputation is sometimes more important for job seekers than its ratings.

To find out more information about a particular station including affiliation, ownership, personnel and equipment, go to the TVjobs.com website. The sidebar has a “quick search” feature that you can type a station’s call letters into and learn more about that station’s ownership and management.

Tvjobs.com
http://www.tvjobs.com

### 4.4 Average Salaries

The average salary for entry-level general assignment reporters remains under $20,000 a year, a figure that hasn’t changed much since I started in the business 14 years ago. As with many other aspects of this business, a low starting salary is yet another way that “green” reporters pay their dues and earn their place in the market. Following is a breakdown from a 2003 survey of annual salaries by the Radio and Television News Directors Association and Ball State University.
Median Television News Salaries By Market Size

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1-25</th>
<th>26-50</th>
<th>51-100</th>
<th>101-150</th>
<th>150+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anchors</td>
<td>$117,500</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
<td>$70,000</td>
<td>$53,300</td>
<td>$35,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporters</td>
<td>$65,000</td>
<td>$47,500</td>
<td>$34,000</td>
<td>$25,000</td>
<td>$22,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weather</td>
<td>$117,500</td>
<td>$89,000</td>
<td>$60,000</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>$42,000</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
<td>$25,000</td>
<td>$22,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: [http://www.rtna.org/pages/research/salaries.php](http://www.rtna.org/pages/research/salaries.php), Radio and Television Survey. (Figures given for sports and weather are for primary (evening) anchors.)

As you can see, salaries vary widely with market size, but there is plenty of room for advancement. Many anchors in big markets are making much more than the median listed, but the largest stations refused to participate in the RTNDA survey - probably because they don’t want to reveal how much their top talent is making!

### 4.5 Market Trends

Gone are the days when television news was the sole domain of men. RTNDA reports that women now make up nearly 40 percent of television news employees – and that number is growing. The exception is sports reporting, which is highly competitive and still dominated by men.

Women also are making strides in management positions. RTNDA reported that just 14 percent of all news directors were women in 1995; that number has now jumped to more than 28 percent.

> “Almost every market I know of is looking for male reporters and anchors. It’s a female-dominated pool of applicants now.”
> —Michael Castengera, TV news consultant

In addition, most of these female applicants are blonde. As a news director, approximately 70 percent of the tapes Castengera received were from blonde women. If you are blonde and female, you will have to work harder to differentiate yourself from the rest of the pack. Your tape must be strong…and you might even consider dying your hair a darker shade to give yourself an edge!
News Director Gary Gunter of KRCR-TV in Redding, California (Market 131) says despite the male shortage (or maybe because of it) it is “even more difficult to find not only a male, but a good male reporter.”

Gunter says males, especially beginning ones, tend not to ask for help with their appearance and are often “awkward and hard to watch.” He suggests that they get critiqued more often from professionals in the business and heed their advice.

4.6 Your Materials

4.6.1 Resume And Cover Letter

Most news directors in smaller markets receive as many as 150 resumes and tapes for every on-air position they advertise, and 50 of them per week without advertising. The RTNDA survey shows entry-level applicants outnumber available positions by ten to one. Desirable locations like California and Florida are particularly competitive, and many news directors in those locales like to hire people who are from the region. For these reasons a compelling cover letter, resume and tape are critical if you want to get noticed. Read on to learn how!

No Mistakes

Proofread! You are applying for a job as a journalist. If you have any typos, spelling errors or grammatical mistakes in your letter or resume, they will hurt your chances of getting an interview. Have someone you trust look over your letter and resume first. News directors don’t want to hire someone who might misspell names on air or have problems constructing a sentence.

A fun website that will give you some insight into the minds of news professionals is located at tvspy.com. The site, which includes various directories, a job bank, Shop Talk newsletter, and several chat forums called 'Watercoolers', was originally started by one of the leading headhunters in the business, the late Don Fitzpatrick.

TVSpy.com
http://www.tvspy.com
Check out the postings in the Watercoolers section, ongoing chat forums where one can post and reply to comments about the media and entertainment industries. One poor person asked the readers for help with her search for an on-air “jon.” She obviously meant “job” but that was only one of several spelling errors in her message. Needless to say, the responses showed just how ruthless TV news professionals can be when it comes to accuracy. Take it from me: a cover letter with mistakes will wind up in the trash.

Crafting The Cover Letter

“Your search is over! I’m the person you’re looking for.”

Sound familiar? It will to news directors, too. If you’ve heard a phrase before and think you’ll use it in your letter, think again. Chances are if you’ve heard it before, news directors have read it hundreds of times. Remember, news directors are looking for good writers, not salespeople. You must be convincing, but not trite.

Spend time writing your letter. A well-written, creative cover letter will speak well for your abilities as a journalist. Just don’t get too cute or too long. News directors are short on time and often short on humor as well.

Here are some other dos and don’ts of cover letters:

Don’t Use Station Stationery

News directors hate when an applicant uses stationery from another TV station to get a job, especially if it is a station where you are interning! It will not impress them; instead it will appear unprofessional and inappropriate.

Be Truthful About Experience

Do not represent an internship in Los Angeles where your primary responsibility was making coffee as “employed at KCBS.” If you answered phones, say that. If you helped write news copy, put it down. Be honest about your previous duties in your letter and resume. Internships are great experience, but don’t make them out to be anything bigger than what they are.

Be Realistic

Don’t tell a prospective news director that you want to be Katie Couric’s replacement someday.
News directors want to know why you want to work at their station. They don’t want to hear why you think you’ll be in a top ten market five years from now.

One of Castengera’s favorite letters began with, “Low pay and long hours, great!” Acknowledge that you are willing to work hard and you understand the demands that will be made of you. Any reference to a preferred salary or schedule (“I’d like to work Monday through Friday”) will hurt your chances of getting hired.

Don’t Make Excuses

“My tape doesn’t sound very good because I had a lot of audio problems when I was making the dub.” A statement like this will hurt your cover letter. If you have problems making dubs of your tape, do them over.

This wouldn’t fly either: “I couldn’t get anyone to shoot my stories for me so I had my roommate do the photography.” Don’t apologize for your tape. You should make sure the tape quality is the best it can be—then stand behind it.

Be Specific

News directors get dozens of letters for jobs every week, whether they’ve advertised an opening or not. What job are you interested in? Reporting? Anchoring? Photography? State it clearly up front, don’t make them figure it out.

Say Something Nice

If you can find something nice to say about the station or city, do it; just make sure it’s accurate. Don’t congratulate the station for being “number one” when they just lost the last ratings period. Likewise, do a little research about the area where you are applying. One news director from Flagstaff, Arizona had an applicant who wrote about how she’d always wanted to live in the desert. Too bad Flagstaff is in the mountains of Arizona.

Many of the smaller stations are located in areas that aren’t the most desirable places to live. If you’re from Southern California, don’t stretch to say why you’re just dying to live in Elmira, New York. If you can find an honest reason why you’d like to locate there (“my grandparents live nearby”), use it. Remember, news directors are looking for people who might stick around for a while.

Include References

If you are an entry-level applicant, you need all the help you can get. Attach your
references and their phone numbers to your resume. News directors don’t have the
time or patience to ask you for them later. If you’re very short on professional experi-
ence, Nancy Popkin, Vice President of Caruso & Company Professional Management
Group, recommends listing your references on your resume below each job entry.

In an article for ShopTalk newsletter, Popkin also had some valuable advice about
checking references. She says you should expect your prospective employer to “cold
call” people you’ve worked with in addition to the list of references you’ve provided.

While a news director might expect a few negatives from the people she cold calls, she
assumes the people from your list will say only good things. If they point out even
slight negatives, the news director may get concerned. You might not have too many
people to choose from at this stage, but here are some of the ways Popkin says you
should “red flag-proof” your reference list:

“Your references should include someone who has invested in you by
training you or mentoring you, someone who believes the time is right for
you to get a job, someone who knows your work first-hand, and someone
who likes you as a person.

“Eliminate any potential reference who is lax returning phone calls,
lavishes praise in an exaggerated way, is unfairly critical of others or
whose opinion you don’t consistently trust.

“Call the people you’re thinking about using. If you hear any hesitation
(‘Sure, but we didn’t really work together’ or ‘It’s been a long time since
I’ve seen your work’), cross them off your list.”

—Nancy Popkin, TV news talent agent

No Pictures, Please!

Even though we all know looks count in the TV business, including a photograph of
yourself with your resume and cover letter is demeaning to your journalistic integrity.
I’ve seen many glamour shots and professional glossies come through news directors’
offices. One woman even included her measurements on her photo!

Usually, these pictures end up pasted to some reporter’s cubicle with assorted horns,
moustaches and captions plastered all over the poor applicant’s face. Don’t become
fodder for the newsroom pranksters. Let your tape show how attractive you are and
save the pictures for your parents.
4.6.2 Resume Tape

While the resume and cover letter are important, the resume tape will make or break your chances of getting the job. Most news directors say they watch most tapes for only **15 to 30 seconds** before they hit the eject button. If you don't capture their attention within that time, your tape will end up in the large recycle pile.

“News directors are often looking at 75 tapes a sitting. They lose perspective quickly. Only the ones who do as many right things as possible are going to make it to the ‘Yes’ pile.”
—Tony Windsor, professional development consultant

You should **include a tape with every resume you send out**, even if the station does not have any openings. The only exception would be if you already have an appointment set up with the news director, in which case you will be hand-delivering your tape.

News directors usually will **look at every tape** that comes through their office and keep the ones they like on file for the next opening. Your resume won’t be impressive enough to stand on its own at this stage of the game, so providing the tape with the resume will give the news director a better idea of who you are.

**Format**

Years ago, most applicants sent tapes on television video format: usually a half-inch or three-quarter inch beta tape. Now, most news directors have VCRs and DVD players or computers in their offices and prefer to receive resume tapes on either VHS format or on DVD, unless otherwise indicated. Some news directors will also accept links to a digital video clip of your resume tape posted online. Since most editing is now done on the computer, **posting your tape online** can be the easiest and certainly the most cost effective route. Posting your tape online also makes it easy to update it regularly as you get feedback and produce more work. But be wary of assuming that sending a link to your online resume tape means news directors will look at it. News directors go through hundreds of tapes when searching for new talent, and having your physical tape sitting in front of them might make you stand out from other candidates. The best advice is to **send whichever format is specified by the news director**, either from the ad you’re answering or from calling the station. If another format is not specifically requested, you’re pretty safe to go with either VHS or DVD.

Plan to buy VHS tapes or DVDs in **bulk**, because chances are you’ll be sending out more than 100 of them. Many people in the business say you should expect to get a response to five percent of the tapes you send out. The more stations you send tapes to, the greater your odds of getting a response. Think about it: if you send out 100 tapes,
just five stations might call back. And that response would be considered successful.

Since buying VHS tapes or DVDs and the packaging for them from a retail vendor can get expensive, either check out a discount warehouse or one of the broadcast outlets. One good source of professional quality bulk tapes, DVDs and packaging is **Tape Stock Online**. You can buy 50+ tapes for 65 cents each, or a spindle of high quality DVDs for about $12.

[Tape Stock Online](http://www.tapestockonline.com)

Another good source for bulk tapes and DVDs is **Delta Media**, formerly known as Tape.com. They also offer good deals, including 50 tapes for around $30 or 50 DVDs for $12.

[Delta Media](http://www.deltamedia.com)

If you don’t have access to a machine that will dub your work tapes onto a VHS or DVD, most video production houses and many photography studios will have the equipment. These places charge from $50 to $100 an hour, so try to take advantage of equipment during your internship while you can. Again, you’ll save money if you make the copies in bulk. **Carpel Video** is a reputable company that offers video production and dubbing (including packaging) onto the format of your choice.

[Carpel Video](http://www.carpelvideo.com)

**What To Put On The Tape**

Plain and simply, **your best work** goes on your resume tape. However, what you might consider “best” and what a news director considers good may be two different things. Although many people have different theories on what should go on a tape, the following order is fairly safe and **accepted in the industry** if you are applying for a general reporting job.

**Name/Address Slate**

A graphic with your name and address should appear at the **very beginning** of your tape, and some say the end, too. You can either have a production company make one for you or talk someone into doing it at the station where you’ve interned. Having the information on the tape is important in case the tape gets separated from your resume.
and cover letter or the label is torn off. Be sure to leave it on the screen for at least 10 seconds so the news director has time to read it.

**Short Montage Of You In The Field**

After your slate, the very first thing a news director should see is you. Remember, you may only have 15 to 30 seconds to sell yourself, so make it good. A **45-second to one-minute montage** can quickly give a news director a sense of your presentation skills and style.

If you managed to do a **live shot** as an intern, start your montage with a clip of that to show you have mastered them. It’s best if you have action in the live shot, like flames coming out of a house, or a graphic that says “Live.” If you don’t have any live shots, **stand ups are the next best thing**.

Those stand ups should have action in them. Show an object, point to an area or walk to a destination. Don’t move just for the heck of it, though — make it meaningful.

**EXAMPLE:**

Say you’re doing a story about a hotel that’s about to be sold to a major chain. For your stand up, you might walk through the turnstile doors from the lobby and go to the sidewalk as you say, “If the deal goes through, these doors might be turning around twice the number of times.”

News directors like to see you doing something, as long as it makes sense. Four unique stand ups or two live shots and two stand ups would make a strong montage at the beginning of your tape. The more **fast-paced** and **interesting** your montage is, the more you will capture the news director’s elusive attention.

Consultant Tony Windsor says the only time a person shouldn’t use the montage is if they are a stronger reporter than on-air performer. In this case, an **impressive story** may be more appropriate to lead off with, but be sure you are seen very quickly during that story.
Dave Kirby, a veteran news director, also advises that if you have a really good story, it is preferable to a montage for your leading clip. In addition, he says that he’s tired of seeing the same type of montages on every tape, so try to be creative.

“All the tapes look alike now,” he says. “Dare to be different.”

A Strong Story

Your strongest package or story on tape should be next, complete with an on-set introduction from the anchors, if you have it. This story should be compelling, visual, well written and include a good stand up. It’s tough to get truly good stories as a student or intern, but if you keep the resume tape in mind as you are working, you may be able to accomplish this. As mentioned, offering to work weekends or odd shifts may give you a chance to get a quality story, since you won’t be competing with as many full-time reporters.

Unless you are applying for a job as a feature reporter, it’s best to stay away from features at the top of the tape — use breaking or “hard” news stories instead. You may truly believe your best work is a feature story, but you run the risk of turning a news director off, even if the story is heartwarming.

“If someone’s best work is a feature story, a lot of people will say it has to be first. But eighty percent of news directors — if they see a feature first, they think the person doesn’t have the knowledge or ability to report a good story.”

—Tony Windsor, professional development consultant

Breaking or hard news stories like fires and murders are good, but you probably won’t cover many if you are an intern. Windsor advises interns to look for “issue” stories to put on their tape first. For example, do a story about the effects of the high price of gasoline. Take an issue and flush it out, show the viewer who is impacted and why it’s important.

Make sure your story has a human element in it. That means you include interviews with “real” people — the victim’s mother, the family whose house burned down or the “mom and pop” gas station owner who is trying to make ends meet. Don’t rely heavily on interviews with officials. You may think these officials are important, but most news directors are not as impressed with this type of interview, because it means you didn’t get to the real source of the story.

A Live Shot

Again, the importance of live shots cannot be stressed enough. If you have a good live shot from something like a fair or a fire, use it here in its entirety. If you are desper-
ate you can use the entire live shot that you ran a clip from in your montage, but it’s always better to show something different.

**Breaking News**

If you have another *serious story* or short breaking news story, put that next.

**Longer Story**

If you’ve had an opportunity to do any kind of *special in-depth report* about two and a half or three minutes long, put it here, as long as it is *interesting* and shows your reporting abilities. Be careful not to put a story here just because it’s long: a common mistake among students and beginning reporters is taking too long to tell a story. Make sure your story is long because it needs to be, not because you just wanted to make it that way.

**TIP:** You can switch the order of your long story and breaking news story if one is clearly stronger than the other.

**Feature/Specialized Report**

Finally, include a good feature story or a report in a specialized area, like consumer or health news.

**A Note For Anchors**

If you are applying for a job as an anchor (which most entry-level applicants will not be) you need to include at least one *full recent newscast*. Some people are able to talk the production staff where they are interning into helping them tape a mock newscast. Those are fine to use, but they should be indicated as such.

Again, don’t try to portray yourself as anything that’s not completely accurate. Consultant Michael Castengera *advises against using anchoring from your college set* because those sets usually look unprofessional. He says, “Go out in the field instead.”

If you do have a real newscast to use, *edit out your co-anchor, long sound bites, weather and sports*. Include tosses to weather and sportscasters and any other interaction with your co-anchor that shows your personality.

If you are an entry-level applicant, put some reporting on your tape even if you are dying to be an anchor, because news directors want to see that you know how to report from the field. Likewise, if you have anchoring samples and you are applying for a reporting job, you can put the anchoring last on your tape.
But beware: many news directors do not want to hire reporters who secretly want to be anchors instead.

Length

Most resume tapes, even for anchors, should be less than 15 minutes. The standard formula of a montage, three to five stories and a live shot should fit well within this time frame.

If you have so many good stories that you don’t know which ones to choose, save some for a second tape. It’s a good idea to keep working on another tape anyway, because if a news director is interested they’ll often want to see more samples of your work.

Faking Stories

If you have not had the opportunity to do any actual reporting for a tape, you may take raw video from another reporter (with their permission) and write your own story. Be sure to shoot and include at least your own stand up, and some additional interviews, if possible.

It is very important that you do the writing of the story and do not plagiarize! Consultant Tony Windsor says most news directors will be able to tell whether the same person who wrote the cover letter wrote the stories on the tape. Do not try to trick news directors: they know the business very well and will quickly discover what you are trying to do.

If a story seems the least bit suspicious, they will make some calls and find out how much of the writing was yours. If you have plagiarized, you may destroy your chances of ever being considered for a position at that station or any other station that hears about what you did.

Other Tape Dos And Don’ts

Do Cue It Up

If you’re sending a VHS tape, remember the news director may be watching 74 other tapes in the same sitting. He or she doesn’t want to take time rewinding or figuring out where yours begins. Make sure your tape is cued to your name slate, which should appear after the first ten seconds.
Don’t Include Color Bars/Tone

This is an old practice that does nothing but annoy news directors.

Do Strive For Quality

Your audio and video quality needs to be the best you can possibly make it. Bad or shaky camera shots will hurt the overall appearance of your tape and reflect poorly on you. The same is true for audio: if a news director has to strain to hear you or your audio levels are jumping all around, your tape will be ejected immediately.

Don’t Include Countdowns Before Stories

This is another old practice that wastes time and annoys news directors.

Do Keep It Recent

Try to use material for your tape that is not more than a few months old. You may not have a choice if you have finished your internship, but in that case, try not to use any stories that are obviously out of date. Reaction to the September 11 attacks or the presidential election will clearly date itself no matter where you are applying.

Local stories aren’t as easy to date, but be careful. You never know where the news director has worked last! Update as often as you can. You should always be striving to do better stories and improve your tape.

Don’t Put Your Tape To Music

It may seem like a creative stroke of genius to put music on your montage, but it will not appear that way to a news director. They need to hear how you sound.

Sending Your Tape

Labels

You should label the tape itself and outside box with your name, address, phone number and the position for which you are applying. The labels should be on the front of the tape and on its side, so the news director can clearly identify it.
You may be able to find discarded plastic boxes at your local video rental store. These are nice because the label will show through the box, making it easier for the news director to find your tape. Remember, tapes often get separated from boxes and letters, so labels are important if you want the news director to identify your tape quickly. Use a colored label to really make your tape stand out.

**Index Card**

Many people list the content of the tape on the tape itself. This makes it impossible for news directors to watch your tape and look at the rundown of stories at the same time. Type a list of your story “slugs” or titles and their run times on a separate 3 x 5 index card in this manner:

```
John Job Seeker
(555) 997-3218

1. Montage   :45
2. Gas Price Hike Pkg 1:30
3. Cameo Canyon Fire Live Shot 1:15
4. Adoption Pt. 1 Series 2:30
5. Cuban Refugee Pkg 1:20
6. Internet Grocery Shopping Pkg 1:15
7. Circus Elephants Pkg 1:10

Total Run Time: 9:45
```

**Enclosing The Resume/Letter**

Don’t make origami out of your resume and cover letter by folding them small enough to fit inside a tape box. Instead, use a padded envelope big enough to fit the unfolded letter and resume with the tape. Enclosing the letter and resume in a file folder inside the envelope will also help keep it from getting crumpled.

**Mailing**

If you are applying for a position that has been advertised or that you just found out about, you should ideally send your tape by overnight mail. This can be
expensive, but your tape is more likely to arrive and get noticed since most other applicants also will be using express mail.

You can also consider **two-day priority**, which is much less expensive than overnight mail, but still has a sense of urgency. For example, here are the current approximate costs of mailing a standard tape from Florida to California through the U.S. Postal Service:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Media Mail (7 day)</td>
<td>$2.38/lb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 day (priority)</td>
<td>$4.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express</td>
<td>$18.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As you can see, mailing 'priority' is only a little over $2 more but five days faster. Just be sure to use the correct postage. You don’t want your tape to arrive with postage due because odds are they won’t pay it.

Some stations return tapes they are not interested in, but most do not anymore. **If you must have the tape back** because you’re running low, include a self-addressed envelope with enough postage…and hope for the best!

### 4.7 Job Hunting

Now that you’ve got the supplies, you’re ready for the toughest part: hunting down a job. Because this business is highly competitive and the openings are limited, you must **take a proactive approach** to your job search.

It is not enough to send tapes only to stations that advertise. Usually, the news director already has a pile of tapes to refer to if there is an opening — the advertising is just a formality. Often the job is already filled by the time the advertisement goes to print. You need to **already have your tape in that pile** to be considered when there is an opening! Here are the steps to follow.

#### 4.7.1 Send Out Your Tape

Unless you absolutely hate the region where you live, the best strategy is to start looking for **job openings near home**. Even if you are in a big city, there’s probably a smaller entry-level market not too far away. Get your Station Guide and start sending resumes, cover letters and tapes to all the small stations (Markets 150-210) closest to you. For example, if you’re living in Fort Myers, Florida, you’ll want to try Sarasota, Gainesville, Tallahassee and Panama City. Remember to **call the stations** first to find out what tape formats they accept and to make sure the contact information is correct.
Don’t get discouraged if you don’t hear back about the first tapes you send out; news directors are very busy — especially in smaller markets, where they may be responsible for performing many jobs themselves. Some even act as reporters or anchors in addition to their management duties. Don’t even expect the news directors to call you; you will have to pursue them. So get ready to do a bit of traveling!

4.7.2 Plan A Road Trip

Wait for a week or two after you send your tape and resume before you call or email the news director. Many news directors now prefer to hear from applicants by email, but emails also are easier to ignore. A phone call may separate you from the rest of the pack since the news director’s inbox is probably flooded with disregarded emails.

Use the upcoming hints on when to call to reach the news director personally; then tell him or her you sent a tape and would like to set up an appointment to come in for a meeting next week. Don’t assume the news director knows who you are or has already watched your tape.

Try to arrange to see as many news directors as you can during the same trip. Usually small market news directors are willing to spend a few minutes with you looking at your tape and telling you what you need to do to get a job at their station. Not all news directors will do this, however, so don’t be upset if you get turned down. Just keep going down the list.

“Road trips are very valuable. I’ve never refused to see anyone. There’s nothing like personal contact, even when I don’t have an opening.”
—Gary Gunter, KRCR-TV News Director

Gunter says if an opening does come up within two or three months after he’s met with someone on a road trip, he still will have that candidate fresh in his mind.
Set Up An Appointment

Many job seekers just show up at stations, expecting to pop in on the news director. News directors don’t like to be popped in on.

“I always was willing to see anyone as long as they would set up an appointment first. If they just stopped by, I’d take a nap in my office before I’d see them.”
—Dave Kirby, former news director

Kirby says one week’s notice for the appointment is usually enough. Don’t make it too far in advance because schedules are liable to change. Most applicants will tell the news director they are “planning to be in the area” on such-and-such a date. This line always made Kirby chuckle. “Not many people would plan to be in Wheeling, West Virginia.”

He says job hunters should be honest about why they want to come by: “I’d like a job at your station!” or “I’d like to hear what you think of my tape.” In fact, he wanted every applicant to come out and ask for the job. Surprisingly, many applicants are shy or coy if they are the ones who first approached the news director for an interview.

When To Call

Most news stations have morning news meetings and afternoon meetings that are run by the news directors.

Most morning meetings begin at 9 a.m. and last about an hour and afternoon meetings often start at 3 pm, so the best time to reach a news director is between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. They often can be found at their desk during the noon hour, since many don’t have time for lunch — just be sure to take different time zones into account.

Do not call right before news time! If the station has a noon newscast, wait until at least 12:20 to call. Likewise, calling past 4 p.m. is a bad idea, because news directors are usually scrambling to help get the evening shows on the air. If you must return a call late in the day, you may want to wait until 20 minutes into the newscast to call. Usually by then, most stations are into their sportscast and the toughest parts are out of the way.

Do not call during a disaster! Use the Internet or CNN to check what breaking news may be going on in a market before you call. One reporter candidate called my former boss in Florida right during the middle of a hurricane threat! This did not impress the
news director. The call showed that the candidate was **not paying attention to the news**. Calling a station in California during wild fires would also be a bad idea, as would be calling a station in Colorado after the Columbine shootings.

### The Meeting

Here’s a posting from the Watercooler message board. The poster was writing to ask for advice on how to handle a situation after she emailed a news director about a job she says she “would kill for.” She told him in her email that she’d “be in town” and would like to stop by and talk to him personally. She continues:

> “Much to my dismay, he replied and even set up a time for me to come in! So my question is, where do I go from here? Should I treat it like an interview and expect to be questioned, or do I go in with guns blazin’, telling this guy why he needs to hire me? Do I dress casually (‘just droppin’ by’) or as if I’m going for an interview? [Do I]…take another resume tape or not?”

The responses were direct:

> “Much to my dismay? I thought you wanted an interview (and the job)!”

> “If he called you, then absolutely treat it as an interview. Dress appropriately. Have a current tape on hand. Be armed with good questions about his station. You might not have another opportunity to make a first impression.”

And from a news director:

> “The news director considers it an interview. You should as well. Dress for the job. Bring a tape and resume.”

**TVSpy.com**

[http://www.tvspy.com](http://www.tvspy.com)

It is amazing how many beginners will not treat their meeting with a news director in the same manner as an actual interview, just because they were the ones who made the first move. **Many people get hired in this business because of their first meeting!** News directors often draw from the people they’ve met as soon as they get an opening.

**This is not a “first date.”** There is no reason to be coy, under-dress, play hard to get or appear less than enthusiastic. This is a very competitive business — you have to be prepared to show you **want** the job. The responses on the message board are correct:
this is your first impression. Make a good one, even if you were the one who set up the
meeting. Remember you are meeting with the news director mainly to ask their advice,
but always be prepared (and hope) for an interview.

**Follow Up And Try Again**

Pack your car with a good supply of tapes and start your station tour. Honor your ap-
pointments with news directors. **Show up on time and expect to wait.** Don’t be late
and don’t drop in without an appointment. This also shows you have no understanding
of the news business. If a news director can’t meet with you when he or she said they
would, you may have to reschedule. You might get lucky and be successful on your first
few trips, but **chances are you’ll be making several journeys.**

Remember that the news directors are doing you a favor by taking the time to meet with
you, so **thank them** appropriately and send a follow-up thank-you letter within a few
days. Ask if they would like you to keep in touch or keep sending them tapes. If they say
yes, **do it every few weeks.**

Even if the news directors have no interest in hiring you, they may be able to **refer you
to another station.** I got my first job in Redding, California after contacting the news
directors at the three stations in my hometown market of Santa Barbara. One of them
told me that his station did not hire entry-level reporters, but they had just hired some-
one from a station in Redding. Sure enough, that lead got me my first job. Don’t dis-
count the **contacts** you can make on your road trips — you never know where they will
take you.

Once you’ve visited the stations closest to you, it’s time to **expand your search.** Begin
targeting markets in nearby states by using the same process. In the meantime, also
keep sending tapes to openings you see advertised.

**Make Changes To Your Tape**

Listen carefully to the critiques news directors give you once they’ve taken the time to
watch your tape. This information is very valuable. One may tell you they hate your hair;
another may love it. One may say a certain story is great, another might not think it
belongs on your tape at all. Because every news director is different, you should **look
for common themes** in these critiques.

If one story generates **several** strong negative responses, take it out. Get a new hair-
style if that seems to come up **a lot.** Professional Development Consultant Tony
Windsor says most entry-level candidates have put together their tapes based on
advice from friends, peers or college professors.
“They complain that they don’t know what to put on their tape because they’ve gotten advice and feedback from so many people telling them different things,” Windsor said. But the opinions of the people they are listening to may be entirely different from what news directors want to see on a tape. The only way to find out what news directors want to see on your tape is to ask them directly. That’s why these road trips are so valuable. You must take their criticism to heart, even if you disagree. Ultimately, they are the ones making the critical hiring decisions.

4.7.3 Call The Stations

After you’ve identified every entry-level station you may be interested in working for, don’t be afraid to call their newsrooms directly and ask if there are any reporting positions open. Remember, positions are often filled by the time they are even advertised on the station’s own website, so you need to stay ahead of the competition.

Ask the receptionist to switch you to the newsroom; then ask whoever picks up the phone if there are any reporter openings expected anytime soon. Everyone answers the phone in a newsroom: anchors, reporters, photographers or tape editors. You don’t need to identify yourself or ask who they are unless they tell you there is an opening.

Chances are the person who picks up the phone will know if someone has just given their notice (or is about to!). This kind of information isn’t kept secret for too long in a place where you have a bunch of reporters nosing around. Again, you may have better luck if you don’t call during meetings or news times.

If you do get a positive response from someone and they seem willing to talk, ask them a little about the position and who the news director might be looking for to fill it. Tell them you’ll be sending a tape and ask if they have any advice. You never know, the person could end up being a good source of information.

4.7.4 Search The Internet

Although the news directors you meet may lead you to some openings, you’ll want to subscribe to at least one industry job line.

MediaLine

MediaLine calls itself the “oldest, baddest, most respected television job listing service in the galaxy.” That may be true. I found my last job through MediaLine six
years ago and know many others who have found success with their service as well. You can subscribe at their website to find more than 100 new job openings advertised every week.

MediaLine
http://www.medialine.com

The advantages to using MediaLine’s services are that the postings are updated daily and most news directors are familiar with the service. So when a reporter walks into their boss’ office and gives notice, all they have to do is pick up a phone and MediaLine will have the opening posted the next day.

Before the days of the Internet, MediaLine used a telephone service to list job openings, but now the positions are posted on their website. You will pay a small fee for the basic service, with a minimum subscription of 5 days for $9.95 or three weeks (21 days) for $30. They claim to list 35-45 anchor/reporter listings, 2-9 sports postings and 3-11 weather openings a week. (Note the lack of available sports jobs!) They also say 20-30 of their positions are entry level (in all television news categories combined, including off-air positions).

MediaLine also offers job applicants the opportunity to post their resume tape online as a streaming video clip in their Talent Showcase section.

One note though: be careful about posting your resume and tape online if you already have a job. You don’t want your current employer to stumble upon your advertisement for a new position!

Other Job Websites

The Journalism Jobs website lists journalism jobs in a variety of media, including television, across North America. This free service also features television internships.
JournalismJobs.com
http://www.journalismjobs.com

Other websites also post jobs in television news for free, although I haven’t found any that are as comprehensive as Medialine. They include:

TVSpy.com
http://www.tvspy.com

Through this site, you can get a free subscription to Shoptalk, a daily industry newsletter. Not only does Shoptalk list new job openings, it also gives updates on where people in the business are moving. So, if you see an announcement that someone is leaving an entry-level position, you can assume there’s an opening at that station (unless the announcement was posted late, which is sometimes the case). You can also search for jobs in the job bank, and for a subscription fee of $29.85 for 3 months, you can post your resume and tape online.

Radio and Television Digital News Association
http://www.rtnda.org

The Radio and Television Digital News Association is probably the most popular and respected professional organization in the country. The RTNDA website provides job openings for free and also gives other employment resources and advice for job seekers.

Mediabizjobs.com
http://www.mediabizjobs.com

Mediabizjobs is associated with Unity Journalists of Color and lists television journalism jobs as well as internships. It used to be free, but now requires a subscription fee of $29.95 for 3 months or $39.95 for 1 year to search and apply for jobs and post your resume online.

Talent Dynamics
http://www.talentdynamics.com

Run by a headhunter, this site offers a job bank and opportunities to receive professional coaching on your performance and resume tape.

The Rundown
http://www.tvrundown.com/archives/intro.htm
Provides industry news, job listings and advice for job seekers.

TVJobs.com
http://www.tvjobs.com

Subscribers get job listings, links and newsletters.

Assignmenteditor.com
http://www.assignmenteditor.com

This page provides links to TV stations, newspapers, magazines, job banks and a host of other resources a job seeker may find handy. Some of the links are free, others require a subscription fee.

A note about job posting websites: Even though numerous free job postings appear on the Internet, these job banks are rather sporadic and often outdated. While a service like MediaLine costs money, it does tend to be more comprehensive and current than the other listings. It would be wise to use as many resources as you can in your first job search.

Don’t forget to check the websites of the stations themselves. Most have them now and list job openings on their site. This is particularly helpful if you are targeting a specific station, or want to keep updated on a station you visited during a road trip. Once you see an opening, call the news director and remind them about you. See above for details on how to make your road trip visit a memorable one for the news director.

4.7.5 Respond To Ads

You find an ad on the job bank that looks perfect for you — or is it? Read the ad carefully to determine exactly what it is the news director is looking for in an applicant.

This section will look at some of the more common expressions in TV job advertisements so you have the inside scoop.

Read Between The Lines

You will see many ads for anchors that say the station is looking for someone to “complement” their male or female anchor…and they don’t mean someone to say nice things! Most stations want a male-female anchor team. If the ad says they want someone to complement their female anchor, they are looking for a male. Likewise, if they want someone to complement their male anchor, they want a woman. They don’t outwardly advertise this out of fear of anti-discrimination laws.
Reporter jobs aren’t as gender specific, although stations do strive to keep a gender and racial balance. If a black male is leaving, they may want to replace him with another black male. If you really want to find out, you can call the newsroom and ask whoever answers your call if the news director is “looking for anyone in particular” to replace the person who left. At any rate it’s still worth sending a tape, because you never know what other openings may arise — or if the news director will change their mind once they see you!

Experience Requirements

If an ad says “No beginners please” don’t send a tape, even if you had the greatest internship in the world.

On the other hand, if it says “two or three years experience preferred,” go ahead and send the tape. Just because the station prefers someone with experience doesn’t mean they are going to get it. Many mid-size and small markets don’t pay enough to hire someone with a lot of experience and may find you to be their best candidate, experience or not.

No Calls, Please

Some people think the words “no calls” in an ad is a trick to see who the most aggressive job applicants are. I would stay away from playing this game, since you run the risk of seriously making someone mad. On the other hand, if there is no call restriction specified or you have already met the news director in person, calling may be the best thing you can do.

Remember, news directors are looking for reporters. Reporters have to be able to call public officials and other newsmakers without fear. If you can’t call the news director, how are you going to be a good reporter? Most news directors, especially in smaller markets, say persistence does pay.

“I like people to bug me — if they bug me, it means they’re going to go after a story.”
—Dave Kirby, former news director

As a news director, Kirby says he instructed every applicant who came through to send him thank-you notes and call regularly — every few days at first, then every few weeks until there was an opening. Only one candidate followed his instructions consistently — most gave up after only a few tries.
The woman who did follow-up made one mistake, though: she called him right before the 6 p.m. newscast Kirby anchored. He took the call, but yelled and screamed at her and slammed the phone down. He then thought, “If she has the guts to call me back tomorrow morning, I’m going to hire her.” She did, and he did and the last he heard, the woman was working as a reporter in Chicago!

Some news directors are clearly annoyed by calls from applicants they haven’t yet met, especially if the caller assumes the news director knows who she is just because she sent a tape. KRCR-TV News Director Gary Gunter says one of his pet peeves is when people call, identify themselves and ask if their tape arrived.

“Do you realize I have looked at fifty tapes in the last two weeks?” he tells them. Gunter says he is not more likely to look at an applicant’s tape just because they called. But, if you do call, Gunter says you should immediately identify the job you have applied for and acknowledge that the news director is busy and probably inundated with tapes.

“Then, give me a line, something unique,” he says. “Like: ‘I imagine you have a mountain load of tapes, but mine is on the top with a flashing red light on it.’” Gunter says if the applicant does something creative that catches his attention, he may be more likely to pull the tape and give it another look.

4.8 Networking Opportunities

With so much competition in the marketplace, a good mentor can be valuable to help guide you through your job search. Your college professor might be the right person if he or she has worked in the television news industry within the last few years. The business is constantly changing and many professors are not able to keep up with what’s really going on.
“There are some good professors, but many are out of touch with the business. The problem is it’s hard for a person to determine whether the mentor they’ve chosen is good.”
—Tony Windsor, professional development consultant

One way to meet a potential mentor, says Windsor, is by attending professional conferences.

RTNDA Conference

One of the best-attended and best-known conferences is put on by the Radio and Television Digital News Association. Almost every station sends its news director or other upper management member to attend this annual event.

“I have to admit to agreeing to look at someone’s tape just because I met them during the social hour at RTNDA. It’s the best way to get your face in front of a number of people in a short time... it helps get your foot in the door.”
—Michael Castengera, TV news consultant

Not only does RTNDA provide these social hours where up-and-coming reporters can meet prospective employers in a friendly setting, they also offer tape critiques and other resources for job seekers.

“They can find a mentor, learn valuable things, meet news directors and ask questions,” says Windsor, who is actively involved in RTNDA.

If you are a student, Windsor advises that you not wait until your senior year of college to attend the conference, because by then it’s often too late to work on major changes in your reporting, delivery and ultimately...your resume tape. He says students should attend during their junior year and bring a tape of work they’ve done to that point.

A student membership in RTNDA is currently $65 per year, which includes a subscription to the organization’s publication, the Communicator. Registration for the 2011 Conference is $195 and $425 for the full conference package. In the past, the RTNDA has offered cheaper fees for students and early registration, so check their website.

RTNDA also sponsors regional conferences that tend to be less expensive, so check their website to see if there will be one in your area.

Radio and Television Digital News Association
http://www.rtnda.org
Other Conferences

The Associated Press often sponsors regional or statewide conferences, as do all of the minority journalism organizations mentioned in Section 3.3 of this guide. These conferences may be a single luncheon or a several-day affair. They’re usually not as expensive as the national conferences. Contact your local AP bureau about their local AP association or check out the AP website for more details.

Associated Press
http://www.ap.org

If you are in the West, check out the Associated Press Television and Radio Association of California and Nevada.

APTRA of California and Nevada
http://www.aptra.org

The National Association of Broadcasters holds a yearly conference that may take place in a city close to you.

National Association of Broadcasters
http://www.nab.org

The Television News Center, a consulting group with national news reporters and anchors on their Board of Directors, sponsors a conference as well.

Television News Center
http://www.televisionnewscenter.org

Again, these national conferences cost between $150-$300, excluding travel and other expenses. Some organizations do offer student, membership or early registration discounts, so be sure to look for those. It is crucial to your career that you get your tape critiqued early by a professional currently working in the industry, so you can look at attending any of these conferences as an investment.

Alumni And Friends

Some journalism schools will provide you with a list of alumni who have landed on-air positions at stations throughout the country. They may be good contacts for you as you begin your job search. Often, people are willing to help students from their alma mater. They can probably tell you stories of their job search, how they successfully landed a job and give you advice on where to begin looking. Just be sure to ask them when a convenient time is to talk.
Throughout your career, it will never hurt to call people you know at various stations. Try to get the person you know to hand-deliver your tape to the news director and ask them to watch it. They’ll usually be more willing to watch a tape given to them by someone they know and trust than the one that arrived in a brown envelope that day. So keep in touch with your fellow students and co-workers — they may land you a job someday!

**Union/Trade Organizations**

Since the hours are long in TV news and the pay often low, many employees at stations of all sizes across the country have decided to unionize. **Unions negotiate overall working conditions** with station management for the employees. Employees at a union shop in Los Angeles, for example, are guaranteed lunch breaks and overtime pay, while employees at a competing station that’s not under a union contract work longer days without the extra compensation or breaks.

Usually, employees join a union after they accept a job with a station that is under a union contract. It is **not necessary to join a union** before you get a job. In fact, for entry-level employees, it is not advisable because your membership might scare some prospective employers away. You probably won’t come across a union shop until you work in a major market: sometimes the technical staff and photographers are unionized, but the on-air talent more often is not.

To prepare yourself for work in the major markets, you can find out more about the following unions at their websites.

**AFTRA**

The **American Federation of Television and Radio Artists** is one of the largest unions representing on-air talent at medium and large market stations. AFTRA also sponsors regional seminars on journalism that may be worth attending.

[AFTRA](http://www.aftra.org)

**NABET**

Another big union that has contracts with many stations is the **National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians**. NABET also offers seminars and services for student members as well.

[NABET](http://www.nabetcwa.org)
4.9  Get Some Professional Help

4.9.1  Agents

Agents represent the news employee, not the station. They rose in popularity when TV newscasters became personalities garnering six and seven figure salaries. Now, agents also represent producers and even news directors. Most agents screen the clients they will represent and choose only those with the most potential to move up in the industry. Therefore, most people will not have the luxury of choosing an agent; instead the agent will choose them. The top rated agents represent anchors at the networks and individuals in large markets like New York and Los Angeles.

The need for agents is a source of disagreement among television news reporters, anchors and news directors. Some news directors in large markets will only look at tapes sent to them by agents while others — especially those in smaller markets — refuse to have anything to do with an agent. Here are some facts so you can weigh the pros and cons yourself.

What Agents Do

Most TV news anchors and reporters sign on with an agent because they think they will help them get bigger and better jobs. Although that can happen, most reporters in small and medium markets will tell you that they got their “big” jobs on their own, without much help from their agent. You are usually still required to pay the agent even if the agent did not help you find your job.

The agent often sees his or her primary role as negotiating contracts for their client, not finding them jobs. Having an agent negotiate the terms of your contract offers several advantages:

It takes you away from having to haggle over money with your future news director and general manager. Agents often will fight for more money and perks than you would have ever requested. Because of their experience, an agent is in a better position than an employee to know what kind of salary and perks are reasonable to expect.

The best agents have a network of contacts among news directors and general managers and will use that network to help their clients search for jobs. The good agents will coach their talent on their performance and help them put together resume tapes. They will keep in touch with their clients and help them resolve any management issues that may arise. They will also help them plan long and short term goals for their career.
The best agents also will limit their client list and send just one tape per job opening, not a box of tapes for each position. The better agents also will tell their clients where they have sent their tapes. Since many agents are also lawyers, some will act as their client’s attorney and accountant – helping them manage their money and giving them advice on investment strategies.

How Much Do Agents Charge?

Almost all agents require their clients to sign a contract with them. The contract can last for one year, two years, four years — or, the entire length of a client’s employment at their next station! Each agent has different requirements and different contracts. Most of them will charge between six and ten percent of their client’s annual salary.

Some agents who represent top talent at the networks and large stations have been known to charge seven percent on the first $100,000 of their client’s salary and five percent on every $100,000 their client makes after that. That’s why agents prefer to represent clients who make the really big bucks!

Do You Need An Agent?

Because agents like to make money, very few will consider taking on an entry-level reporter with a base salary under $20,000 a year. That’s only $2,000 for the agent! However, some agents will try to secure beginning talent early in their careers if they see something in them that spells major market potential.

When he was a news director at a station in Market #81, Michael Castengera was approached once by a big name agent about a beginning female reporter Castengera had interviewed. Castengera told the agent he didn’t want to deal with him because he didn’t believe an agent should be taking money from someone who would be making such a low salary. The agent assured Castengera that he wasn’t taking any money from the client — he was more interested in her potential. Sure enough, just a few years later, that woman was working in Philadelphia — Market #4.

Still, Castengera sees little advantage an agent would offer an entry-level job applicant. In fact, he says, an agent calling a small market news director often scares the potential employers away. Consultant Tony Windsor agrees, although he says it doesn’t hurt to send the agents a tape unless they specifically advise otherwise.

“Most agents will look at your tape. Not many will call entry-level applicants back, but every once in a while they may find a person who has real
promise and help them get a job without having to sign a contract [with the agent]."
—Tony Windsor, professional development consultant

Personally, I have heard very few reporters and anchors in smaller and medium markets rave about their experience with agents. Most reporters complain that they do all the work sending out tapes and contacting news directors about jobs while the agent collects part of their paycheck. On the other hand, an agent may be a necessity in top twenty markets because some news directors in large markets deal only with agents.

If you just need someone to look over the details of a contract for a new job, you might consider hiring an attorney with entertainment law experience. Attorneys will charge by the hour — you won’t be obligated to them long term. As mentioned, though, be careful about being way too picky about your contract if you are accepting your first job in television. Even hiring an attorney could be a deal breaker at this stage in the game!

Choosing An Agent

Just a word about choosing an agent: ask as many people in the business you can about the agent’s reputation. Also, ask the agent to supply you with a client list, and call some of the people he or she represents. You want to find out whether this agent will actually work for you or just collect your money.

The Shoptalk daily newsletter at TVSpy.com usually contains names of people moving up in the business and the agents who represent them. Take a good look at this list. Are some of these people moving to your dream station? Their agent may be the right one for you.

TVSpy.com
http://www.tvspy.com
Here is a partial list of some of the **biggest and most respected agents** in the business. These and many more agents can be found at the TVSpy.com website listed above.

- **Caruso & Company**
  

- **N.S. Beinstock**
  
  [http://www.nsbeinstock.com](http://www.nsbeinstock.com)

- **Rick Gevers & Associates**
  
  [http://www.rickgevers.com](http://www.rickgevers.com)

- **Geller Media Management**
  
  [http://www.gellertelevision.com](http://www.gellertelevision.com)

- **Ken Lindner & Associates**
  
  [http://www.kenlindner.com](http://www.kenlindner.com)

- **Napoli Management Group**
  
  [http://www.tvtalent.com](http://www.tvtalent.com)

- **Willinger Talent Agency**
  
  [http://www.willingertalent.com](http://www.willingertalent.com)

- **William Morris Endeavor Entertainment**
  
  [http://www.wma.com](http://www.wma.com)

### 4.9.2 Professional Tape Critiques

Many hopeful TV reporters waste a lot of time submitting less-than-professional quality tapes to news directors and wonder why they don’t have any success landing a job in the highly competitive news markets. As Tony Windsor, professional development consultant says, “Too many people come to someone like me after they’ve spent a lot of time doing things the wrong way.”

If you’ve worked hard on your tape, taken it to RTNDA (see section 4.8 on conferences), shown it to six news directors, five professors and countless friends and it’s still not getting you any leads, you might want to consider paying a professional service to critique your tape.
There are a variety of such services across the U.S. who can help you polish your existing resume tape or even create a new one from scratch. Services like these can vastly increase the professional look of your tape.

Some of the agencies that offer tape critiquing and tape creation services are:

**GetaTVJob.com**
They have offices in Boston and Philadelphia. Services offered are demo tape creation, re-editing current demo tape, skills session, resume and cover letter review, and demo tape review (this last service costs $200).
http://www.getatvjob.com

**Talent Tapes**
This company, based in Augusta, GA, is run by former reporter, anchor, producer and news director, Rich Everitt. Talent Tapes offers several different plans for improving your resume tape, which cost from $175-$295. They also offer a “Create from Scratch” plan that includes creating a demo tape, professional career coaching, 10 VHS dubs (copies of your finished tape), and your own website. Cost for this full-service option is $1,950 (you can pay in three installments).
http://www.talentapes.com

**American Broadcast Talent**
This company is located near Orlando, Florida. They offer workshop sessions for individuals or groups that cover all aspects of creating a resume tape from scratch. Contact them through their website for more details about pricing and location.
http://www.americandBroadcasttalent.com

**Los Angeles Reporters Clinic (LARC)**
LARC offers “Platinum”, “Premium” and “Plus” clinics. The two-day Plus class includes a finished demo tape with one news package, one live shot, one live voice-over and a montage, as well a training workshop and professional reference, for a cost of $999. The Premium 3-day clinic costs $1,950, but offers more footage and one-on-one training, as well as lifetime career counseling. The 4-day Platinum package costs $2,499 offers all of this plus additional instruction on covering stories, practicing live shots, studio editing, anchor practice and more.
http://www.larcinc.org

**Sportcastingjobs.com**
Veteran sportscaster Dave Benz, who has worked as a sportscaster as well as anchored for Fox Sports, among others, will evaluate your mailed-in resume
tape and offer specific suggestions for improving it. Cost for the critique is $129 and includes access to a database of current sports jobs. If your interest lies in sports reporting, you might want to check out this site. Benz is located in Denver, CO.

http://www.sportscastingjobs.com/tapes.asp

Career Videos
Another company that helps prepare resume tapes, provides coaching and does tape critiquing is Career Videos, a company owned by Bob Hillman, a 34-year news veteran. You can check out a description of his work on MediaLine, or you can contact Bob at the email listed below:

Career Videos
http://www.medialine.com/mall/index_generic.htm?pageview=bobhillman
Email: careervideos@hotmail.com

You will find other advertisements for professionals who critique tapes in the media publications previously listed. If you hire someone, be sure they have had extensive experience working in television news, preferably as a news director. Or, if you made a good contact during your internship consider taking your tape to that person. A friendly anchor, producer or reporter may offer some good input for you. The people critiquing your tape may suggest putting your stories in a different order, or replacing some stories with more effective packages that you have left off.

It’s always best to get your work critiqued early while you still have a chance to improve your reporting or delivery, because if you’ve already completed your internship, you’ll only be able to work with the stories you have.

If you decide that you need to get new material to make changes to your tape, you may consider volunteering to work a few more weekends where you interned (or at another small station) to get the content you need.

4.9 3 Headhunters/Consultants

Several well-known headhunters will add portions of your tape to their talent library for free. These consultants represent stations, not talent, but through their talent library they provide their stations with a selection of candidates from which to choose.

You should always have a current tape on file with at least two or more of these companies. Many of the consultants listed below have specific people who deal with on-air talent, so call to find out to whom the tape should be addressed.
Frank Magid Associates
http://www.magid.com

Audience Research & Development (AR&D)
Talent Dynamics (subsidiary)
http://www.ar-d.com
http://www.talentdynamics.com

Note: Talent Dynamics charges a one-time $35 processing fee to be placed in their Talent Bank.

Broadcast Image Group
http://www.broadcastimage.com

4.10 The Interview

Congratulations! If you have made it to the actual interview stage, you are on your way to getting your first job. Remember, news directors often view more than 100 tapes for each opening — only three or four of the top candidates will get called back. If you are getting called back, that means you are doing something right on your tape. If you’re not, try getting someone to critique your tape again.

4.10.1 What Do News Directors Want?

Many reporters searching for jobs are trying to uncover the secrets of what qualities news directors are really looking for. There’s no magic formula, but one small market news director had an interesting response to a question posted in TVSpy Watercooler:

Question: “As a recent grad currently looking for an on-air reporting position in a small market, I was wondering what is actually expected of entry-level talent? What do you as small market
news directors look for while watching tapes? How much of the tape do you actually watch? Do you read our cover letters and resumes? Do you account for potential and room for growth and improvement? Does it matter all that much whether an applicant went to grad school?”

Response: “Small market news directors look for many different things, one of which is not grad school. We look for intern experience for one. Appearance does matter, no matter what anyone says. Voice matters a lot. Referrals matter a lot. It pays to know and be recommended by professors. Writing matters and believe it or not, we can tell if you have just voiced-over a package done by someone else. The resume tape matters more than the resume itself. If you know how to shoot yourself, you have a leg up on the competition. Small markets are well known for one-man bands. You must also love journalism. If you are in it just to be on TV, go to Los Angeles and be in commercials. TV news is supposed to be a noble industry and those who try to make it something else fall by the wayside quickly.”

Even though that response was authored anonymously, it is consistent with everything in this guide and could have been written by any one of the news directors I have interviewed. It is a good summary of what matters most to the people who ultimately do the hiring, so keep each of its points in mind.

4.10.2 Do Your Homework

Dave Kirby tells this story about his days as a news director at a small station in West Virginia:

A reporter candidate had set up an appointment to meet with Kirby while she was making a road trip through the state. Kirby was immediately impressed by the woman: she was stunningly attractive, articulate, bright and confident.

She told him her goal was to begin her broadcasting career in West Virginia, so she had spent several weeks traveling through the state meeting news directors, watching local newscasts and taking notes on them. Kirby asked her what she thought of the people on the local newscasts she had seen. She told him they were good, but she could do a much better job.
By this time, Kirby was so dazzled by the woman that he was ready to offer her his next job opening. Then he asked her who the governor of West Virginia was.

“The tears started rolling down her face as she told me she didn’t know,” he remembers. “I asked her — how could you be in this state for two weeks watching all the local news and not know who the governor is?”

That was the end of their discussion and the end of her job chances at Kirby’s station.

Questions To Be Prepared For

Not all small market news directors will give you a current-events quiz, but be prepared for one. You should be able to answer all these questions about the region where the station is located:

- Who are the two U.S. Senators from the state and what are their party affiliations?
- Who is the governor? Is he or she a Democrat or Republican?
- Who is the U.S. Representative from the district?
- What is the approximate population of the region?
- What are the main industries?
- What are the most important and controversial issues to the region (e.g. — water, growth, housing, transportation, etc.)?
- You should also know the names of major national officials, such as the Secretaries of Defense and State and Speaker of the House.

The above list is the minimal amount of information you should know. It doesn’t hurt to also find out the mayor’s name and the county where the station is located.

Resources For Research

There is no excuse in this Internet Age not to research the city and state where you are applying. You should begin studying the following as soon as you get the call:
The station’s own website. Many are now posting news stories: find out what issues they are covering and who’s who at the station.

The websites of the competing TV stations in the same market

The local newspaper where the station is located

A major metropolitan newspaper from the largest city closest to the station

The Chamber of Commerce in the station’s city

**TIP:** Be sure to read the local newspaper the day you arrive, if you can. If not, read the most recent issue on the Internet before you leave. If the news director doesn’t ask you about current local issues, bring something up that you read. The news director will be impressed that you took the time to do your research.

### 4.10.3 Getting There

When I had interviews for combination anchor-reporter positions, the stations paid for my travel expenses. (The flights, meals and hotels generally get a little better as you move up in market size!) Usually, the news director and other on-air talent will take you out to dinner and treat you to a tour of the region. Each station has different policies, so be sure to clarify those restrictions in advance. When I flew out for my first job interview at KRCR-TV in Redding, California, the news director told me the station would pay for the flight, but if I was offered the job and turned it down, I would have to reimburse them for half the cost of the plane ticket!

If you are interviewing for a reporter position at a station in Market 100 or above, do not expect to be paid to travel. Gary Gunter, the current news director for KRCR-TV, says he usually gives this pitch to his top reporter candidates:

“I liked your tape and would like to meet you, but we’re a small station and we just don’t have the resources to fly you out here – is there any chance you’ll be in the area sometime soon?”

Since most of Gunter’s top candidates are already living in California (in-state competition is stiff for desirable locales like California and Florida), he usually has no problem getting the candidate to agree to drive to the station on their own. Gunter says he’ll usually throw in $40 for gas money.
Other small- to mid-market stations will hire reporters based solely on their tape, without even meeting them, but don’t count on that happening. If the news director calls you and suggests you come by for a visit — do it if at all possible. The competition is so fierce that it will be just as easy to call the next candidate, who probably will make the trip.

### 4.10.4 Dress For Success

You should **dress for the interview the way you would dress for the camera**. Re-read Section 2.5 (“Your Appearance”) and follow it: no excessive jewelry, hair neat and professional and clothing that’s tasteful and conservative. You do not need to apply the full television makeup for the interview (especially if you are a male!), but bring some with you in case you have to audition on camera.

A solid-colored well-tailored suit usually will work well for both women and men for the interview. Stay away from trends — invest in a suit that will stay in style. If you are female, do not wear anything low cut, too short, sheer or otherwise revealing. You want the news director to think of you as a professional — not a centerfold. Likewise, **make sure your shoes are practical**: you may find yourself sent out in the field carrying a tripod and you won’t want to do that in three-inch heels!

When you’re choosing what to wear, keep **region** and **climate** in mind. If you are going to a station in Florida on a hot summer day, a heavy wool suit is out of the question. For my interview in Florida, I wore a light, solid-colored dress/jacket combination. When in doubt, stay on the conservative side, but try to dress appropriately for the market as well.

### 4.10.5 Expect To Write

The refrain is becoming a common one among news directors today: “**Kids right out of school don’t know how to write.**”

KCRR-TV News Director Gary Gunter says most college graduates — even from journalism schools — are writing in an overly complicated, convoluted and academic style. If you want to truly differentiate yourself as an applicant, learn to write well.

Review the writing skills in Section 2.4 of this guide and buy one of the books recommended. Spend more time **reading** in your spare time. When you write, step back from what you are writing and figure out what you are really trying to say. **Simplicity is key** when you are writing for television.
Many news directors will ask their reporter candidates to spend thirty minutes re-writing wire copy during their interview. This will be very easy for you to practice. Go to one of the news wire service sites on the Internet: Reuters, United Press International or the Associated Press.

Assignmenteditor.com Wire Links
http://www.assignmenteditor.com

Pick a story and re-write it in broadcast format. Try to do your rewrite in 20 minutes or less. You should spend the most time on the lead — the attention grabber. Then fill in the details. The keys to re-writing wire copy are putting it in the present tense, using as many of your own words as possible, keeping sentences short and punchy and eliminating unnecessary words. The simpler you keep your copy, the better! Here is a sample of how wire copy can be re-written for broadcast:

WIRE VERSION:

HAVANA (Reuters) - Surrounded by his closest family and away from the public eye, 6-year-old Elian Gonzalez restarted life back home in communist-run Cuba on Thursday after returning from the United States at the end of a bitter, seven-month custody saga. The government, despite having won its battle to bring Elian home, announced that mass rallies would continue in its wider fight to overturn the U.S. economic embargo on Cuba and end a U.S. immigration policy that Havana blames for causing Elian's tragic story.

REWRITE FOR BROADCAST:

A joyful reunion in Cuba tonight: little Elian Gonzalez is back home. The six-year-old boy was surrounded by close family members after he landed in the Communist country late this evening. He had spent seven months in the United States at the center of a bitter custody battle. Even though Elian is home now, the Cuban government blames U.S. immigration policy for what happened to the boy. Cuba is vowing to continue protesting the current U.S. economic embargo on that country.

4.10.6 Expect To Audition

Anchors

If you are applying for a position that involves anchoring, you probably will have to audition with your potential co-anchor. Usually, you'll be given an old newscast to
read. Your co-anchor will say a few lines and you’ll read the bulk of it. You may be asked to interact with the co-anchor and just talk to one another while you are on the set.

The entire audition will be taped so the news management can judge how well you and the co-anchor “fit” together. This judgment can be purely subjective: I saw one news director disqualify an anchor candidate because she thought his head was oddly shaped!

While some things (like the shape of your head) will be beyond your control, you should strive to make the audition your best performance. Ask to pre-read the copy before the audition and make changes in it if you find any land mines such as sentences that are too long or awkward. Ask how to correctly pronounce names of cities or local officials that show up in your copy. Again, don’t assume anything. Punta Gorda in Florida is pronounced “punt” like kicking a football, not “poont”, which is the Spanish pronunciation.

Your co-anchor and the studio staff will be pretty laid back during your audition since it is not a live newscast, but you need to perform as if you are on the air live. You usually will only get one chance to tape your audition, so put everything you have into it. Don’t get too serious, though! Most news directors want someone the viewers can relate to, so smile when appropriate and try to appear as comfortable and confident as you can.

Pretend your co-anchor is your best friend, even if you just met. The news director is looking for chemistry between the two of you. Look at him or her when you are both on camera together. I’ve seen some news directors roll tape while the applicant and anchor are chatting together on the set, so be aware of this possibility. Ask the anchor a few questions about his or her life and be very positive in your responses! Chances are, if you have a microphone on, a whole control room is listening.

The audition can make even seasoned veterans nervous. A lot of people will be “stopping by” the control room where the audition is being taped to check out the candidate (that’s how I heard about the head comment). You have to get used to being scrutinized in this business. Viewers can be especially harsh at times, so you must learn to develop confidence and a thick skin. Don’t take the criticism personally: they might hate you one place and love you at the next station.
Reporters

As part of the interviewing process, reporter candidates will often be asked to go out on a story with another reporter and then put together their own story from the field tapes and interviews. You will usually be given a deadline to complete the story. This is when your education or internship in a small market will pay off! If you’ve already been going out on stories, this part of the interview will be easy. If all you did during your big market internship was make some phone calls, you’ll have a tough time passing this test.

Here are some tips for making the most of your audition story:

- **Shorter is better.** Since you will be nervous and under a deadline, strive for quality, not quantity. Keep the package 1:20 or under.

- Use the most **dramatic sound bites** you have and put them early in the story. Try to stay away from officials and use a more human approach.

- Spend time crafting a **creative standup**, as discussed earlier in this guide. Again, your future employer wants to see you on camera. But keep the stand-up short — 10 or 15 seconds. A stand-up that ends your story is much easier to shoot than a bridge — that goes in the middle of it, because you have to write around the bridge. Play it safe and shoot a stand-up ending.

- The best way to end a story is usually by **telling the viewer where the story goes from here**: “The vote on whether to tear the landmark down will be held next week. Insiders say it will be close.” Then say the city, your name and station. “In El Mira, Sally Smith reporting for WXYZ-TV”.

- Remember to **tell a story** and write to your video! **Don’t use big words** to impress the boss — news directors hate big words. And stay away from **cliches** or worn out expressions like, “Only time will tell,” or “No one’s sure what will happen next.” Tell viewers what you do know for sure, but don’t preface it with, “One thing’s for sure…” because that’s old, too!

**4.10.7 Other Tips**

**Expect the Unexpected**

Everyone has different stories to tell about their interview experiences. I’ve been **quizzed** about public officials, my goals, my family and my experience in one interview — and asked virtually **no questions** in another. (I was offered the jobs in both cases.)
One reporter applicant posting a message in **TVSpy Watercooler** said a news director named off three movies and asked which his favorite was and why. He couldn’t understand how this question related to the job. Some news directors may be trying to **catch people off guard** during the interview to see **how they handle a tough situation**. If you’re working in live television, there will be plenty of tough situations!

If you honestly don’t know the answer to a bizarre question, try your best not to get flustered. Tell the news director you **don’t know** — you haven’t had much time to get to the movies lately. News directors want to be reassured that **you won’t fake an answer** because that is what many beginning reporters often do when they’re asked a live question by an anchor. If you don’t know the answer, say so and move on.

On the other hand, some interviewers may be trying to gauge how much you know about the world around you. It’s a good idea to be **familiar** with the literary best-seller list and read at least one of them. Keeping up with the newspaper will help you answer questions like, “Who just won the Superbowl?” and “What’s George Clooney’s most recent movie?”

### Why You?

One of the toughest questions of all that’s very common goes like this:

> “**You see all those resume tapes I have stacked up? Why should I hire you instead of any of them?**”

Have a confident but not cocky answer ready for this one. Something along the lines of:

> “**Because I work hard, I’m excited to be here and I’ll do a great job for your station.**”

### Attitude

This brings up an important point about your attitude during the entire interview process, which could last several days. You must **walk a thin line between confidence and conceit**.

The news director wants to see someone with confidence but other news employees may be ready to eat you alive if you come strutting into the newsroom. I’ve known at least two candidates who loudly announced to the news director that their goal was to be the next **Barbara Walters** or **Diane Sawyer**. A much better goal is to be the best reporter you can possibly be for **this** station.
You can be honest if you have higher aspirations…most people do. Just keep in mind that most news directors don’t want to hire someone who will be gone in a year. Tell them why you want to work in their city at their station. Then, you can say, “Eventually I’d like to work in New York City because that’s where I’m from, but I know I have a lot to learn before I get that far.”

Remember, the interview process is going on the whole time you are in the city — even after hours and even if you’re not with the news director. I’ve gone out for drinks and even to the beach with other station employees during some interviews. You can bet you are still being judged, and what they say about you may have an impact on the news director. So be friendly but cautious.

**Friendliness Counts**

KRCR-TV News Director Gary Gunter says he forgoes the quiz about public officials and just has a conversation with applicants instead. Gunter admits he may be a different breed of news director, but he wants to know the person can loosen up and not be entirely serious or intimidated.

“I want to see what they’re really like as a human being. I’m an easy-going, fun-loving, joking guy. I want people who think being in TV is a helluva lot of responsibility but also a lot of fun.”

—Gary Gunter, KRCR-TV News Director

Size up the news director after you meet him or her. If he’s strictly down to business, you can be too, but most want someone who’s not going to have an attitude problem and who will be a pleasant, low-maintenance employee. So lighten up and show your sense of humor. Don’t be too full of yourself.

**Asking Questions**

Asking the wrong questions during an interview could end your job chances. Many news directors say a red flag goes up if an applicant asks any of the following:

- Will I ever get a photographer?
- Will I get Christmas off?
- How many hours a day will my shift be?
How much vacation time will I get?

Do I have to work weekends?

Granted, those types of questions would be standard for most job interviews, but because of the highly competitive nature of TV news these questions indicate you might not be **willing to work hard**. They also indicate a **lack of knowledge** about the industry. You should already know that most new employees will work holidays, weekends and **plenty** of overtime.

“If they ask those questions up front, I know we’re going to have problems,” says Gunter. He wants an applicant to come in with an attitude that says, “When can I do it and how much do I have to pay you?”

Former news director Dave Kirby says there is **one question all applicants should ask** at the end of the interview when the news director says, “Do you have any questions?”

**The answer:** “When do I start?”

**Make It Memorable**

Don’t let them forget you after you’re gone. Give the news director **an interesting tidbit** about your life:

“**I just ran a marathon!**”

“**I just returned from a year-long trip to China.**”

Try to find something that might develop into a personal conversation. That way, if they are interviewing several candidates, they’ll **remember** that you were the marathon runner or world traveler. This works especially well if you’re on a road trip. That way, when you call back several months later to ask about openings, you can **refresh the news director’s memory** by saying, “Remember me? I’m the guy who likes to go bungee jumping.”

**Make Contacts**

I was once alone in the ladies’ room with a woman who had flown in to interview for my job. Despite this **prime opportunity** to learn insider information, she never asked me about the job or why I was leaving!
Ask **anyone** you can about the station, how they like their jobs and how they like the city. Try to make **at least one personal contact** with another reporter or producer. Then if you’re undecided about the job you can call them later and talk with them. Email is another great way to keep contacts you meet during interviews. Remember, each contact you meet could lead to another job.

### 4.11 Choosing A Station

You may not have the luxury of choosing a station, especially for your first job on air. Some people spend two years sending out tapes before they even get one call for an interview. If you are fortunate enough to get several offers, you’ll want to **take the following into consideration** before you accept the job.

#### 4.11.1 Market Size

This guide has given you market sizes to shoot for as a general rule of thumb, but **don’t judge a station solely by its market size**. A station in Market #150 might be far superior to a station in Market #85. Again, a lot depends on the philosophies of the management and owners. When I was working in Boise, Market #112, I interviewed at a station in the 80 market range in Ohio. The equipment at my station in Boise was far better — in fact the Ohio station didn’t even have computers yet. They were still using typewriters in 1994!

> “People who make a decision just based on market size are making a bad choice. You can get an entry level job at a higher market, but the station might not be very good.”
> —Tony Windsor, *professional development consultant*

In fact, more medium-sized markets are hiring entry-level reporters to save money. They know beginning reporters will work more hours for less money. But what does that say about the **quality** of the station?

> “The higher the market number (150-210) the better your chances of getting a job and the better your chances of finding a quality station.”
> —Tony Windsor, *professional development consultant*

In Windsor’s view, one of the best stations in the country from an equipment and reporting standpoint is WVIR in Charlottesville, Virginia — Market #183.
Other **small markets with strong reputations** are Bakersfield, California (#125) and Palm Springs (#142). Reporters from those markets have been known to jump to Los Angeles (#2)! Use the market size as a **general** guide, but look closely at how the station operates and where people move from there.

### 4.11.2 The News

Think long and hard about the **type of stories you will be sent to cover** at the station where you want to work. Is it a capitol city? Then you should know a lot about politics. Is it an area for tourism, but not much news? The location might be nice, but the stories could be boring.

Most small stations are not located in areas where news is constantly breaking. A murder will be covered for **weeks** at a small station. Bigger stations will only cover a murder if there’s an interesting plot twist, like a celebrity involved. Smaller stations will cover **traffic accidents, overturned trucks and the opening of a new WalMart**.

Find out the **news philosophy** of the station management. Do they promote enterprise stories (those reporters dig up themselves) or just cover the breaking news of the day? Since major breaking news stories are limited in small markets, you’ll get a better tape if you are allowed to enterprise stories and do special reports or series pieces.

**Tabloid-news**

Some stations (especially FOX affiliates) put on **tabloid-style newscasts**. They are after a particular audience and won’t think twice about assigning reporters to do a series on “Sexual Fantasies.” I’ve seen other stations jump at any chance to do a Viagra update or in-depth look at breast augmentation.

If this type of “news” bothers you, think twice before saying yes to a job where these stories are the norm. Keep in mind that many mainstream stations also turn to these topics during ratings periods to attract more viewers.

**Natural Disasters**

When I took a job in South Florida, I didn’t think much about **hurricane** threats — I didn’t view them as being all that common. After all, living on the West Coast, I could only name one big storm in the last ten years.
So, I was astonished when we had to go into an emergency mode when every tropical wave formed. We averaged three or four actual threats every year. On several occasions, cots and food were ordered and we were told we could not go home until the threat was over. Reporters were sent to dangerous locations where the storm was projected to hit.

For me, the six months from June to November were spent in fear of the next hurricane threat. I was more worried about the demands placed on us at the station than the storm itself. I wanted to be home with my family during a storm threat, not sleeping on a cot. However, hurricanes are major news in Florida and news departments must react to them. You should be aware of the kinds of natural disasters you might be dealing with on a regular basis in a particular market.

Here are other common examples:

**Blizzards, Cold Weather**

Beware of moving to a cold climate if you’re not accustomed to temperatures below freezing. Inevitably, you’ll be sent to cover the sleet and snow when no one else would dare venture out.

**Fires**

Expect to get dirty and smoky in regions like Northern California and the Pacific Northwest, where fire season is a real problem.

**Heat**

If you’re from the West Coast, make sure you spend a summer in a humid climate before you commit to a job in the East. Again, you’ll be sent out on sticky days when most people are inside with their air conditioners blowing.

### 4.11.3 How Solid Is The Station?

The changeover in station ownership is getting as high as the divorce rate. Once a station does change hands, it’s not uncommon to see the entire staff of the news department get fired. One small station was forced to shut its news department down completely until the new owners took control of the bottom line. You’re pretty safe if the owner is a large, well-established media conglomerate like Gannett or the New York Times Company that isn’t going out of business any time soon.
In fact, one of the best stations I worked for was KTVB-TV in Boise, Idaho, which was formerly owned by the now defunct KING Broadcasting. We were the smallest station owned by KING but got many of the same perks given to the company’s larger stations in places like Portland and Seattle. The owners pumped money into our station on equipment and benefits like they did for their larger stations because they had a commitment to quality and a “bigger market” mentality.

A family-owned station can be a safe bet as well, provided the family is well established and stable. If the patriarch is near death and there’s talk of a sale, you can’t be sure what will happen. Generally, if the station has been profitable it will be sold to decent owners. If the station has been losing money, I would advise that you don’t get yourself into a long-term commitment. Ask how long the station has been under the same ownership and how stable the owners are. The longer the station has been owned by the same company or family, the better.

What do current and former employees say about the station? Find out where other reporters have gone from there, then call them up and ask why they left. Did they leave because of poor station management or to take a better job? Would they recommend working at this station? Most former employees will be honest with you. The bottom line is the stability of the station and commitment to a quality news product.

4.11.4 The Ratings Debate

Is it better to work for a solid number one station or a number two that tries harder? The issue is debatable. Good ratings mean more money for the station in the long run — but not necessarily for the employee. Some number one stations will become complacent with their standings and not invest as much in their equipment or people. If they’re already number one, why should they spend more? On the other hand, a station that’s a close number two might be willing to spend the extra money to become number one.

I’ve worked for a market leader that paid the worst salaries by far in that market to all its employees. Even the distant number three station paid better and offered more benefits. Again, the issue often goes back to the reputation of the ownership.

For your first on-air job, the ratings probably aren’t that important — unless they are so horrible that the news department is in danger of shutting down or canceling a newscast. If your goal is to move up in the business to a higher market, you’ll want to work for a station where you can get a good quality tape. Choose one that invests in their people and on-air product.
4.11.5 Salaries And Perks

Salaries

Section 4.4 already has detailed the average salaries in the industry for entry-level applicants, reporters of various types and anchors. You won't have much room for negotiation when it comes to your first salary but make sure that you will be making enough to live on! Then you can use the tips in Chapter 5 (“Being Successful”) to earn yourself a promotion, raise or new job offer and increase your income.

Many beginning reporters are so dedicated to pursuing this profession that they will moonlight as waiters or waitresses to supplement their income. You can consider this option, but be aware that some stations will not allow you to take another job so make sure that they are aware of your intentions before viewers stumble across the local reporter bussing tables and balancing trays.

Your salary will also have a lot to do with what other stations in the same market are paying. Florida is known for paying in sunshine, meaning you'll earn less for the privilege of working in a tropical climate. If you need to make more money right away, remember that stations in less desirable locales tend to pay a little better.

Moving Allowance

Most stations will give you some money to help you move, but again this depends on the market and the ownership of the station. At KRCR-TV in Redding, California, anchors are reimbursed for their moving expenses up to a point, but reporters aren't always so fortunate.

“It depends on where I am in my budget year,” says KRCR News Director Gary Gunter. Gunter says if it's early in the year, he might offer a reporter $200-$250 dollars to help
pay for gas and a trailer. If it’s close to the end of the year, the moving budget may be dried up. Still, Gunter says because most reporters are so eager to take the job, not paying for a move has never caused a problem.

**Clothing Allowance**

This is another issue that’s very specific to the market and station. I’ve worked at a small station in Chico, California, where my *on-air wardrobe was furnished* for me every night by a local clothing store. (Usually this perk is given to anchors, not reporters.) At a larger station in Florida, we were given no money for clothes.

Buying clothes for television can get **expensive**. Some stations will have trade-outs with local stores so employees can borrow or buy clothes at a **discount**. In exchange, the store gets a certain amount of free advertising. Other stations will give the employee **$1,000 toward clothes for the year**, and still others will claim your clothing costs are included in your salary.

Unfortunately, on-air clothes are not tax deductible, so choose wisely when you do buy them and make sure they won’t go out of style anytime soon.

**Hair, Makeup And Other Perks**

If you are deciding about a job, be sure to find out if any money is offered toward **haircuts, makeup, dry cleaning or health club memberships**. I’ve seen some stations pay for unlimited highlights, cuts and styles. You’ll usually have to go to a specific salon and the station management will have more authority to direct your hairstyle because they are paying for it. I heard of one news director who actually called the stylist personally and ordered her to cut an anchor’s hair shorter! Still, the hair perk can save you a lot of money.

An **annual makeup allowance** is fairly common for men and women at most stations. This can range from **$100-$200**, an amount that will cover everything for men and just get the women started.

**TIP:** Women should buy two sets of makeup — one for on air and a cheaper set for when you’re not on camera.

**4.11.6 General Managers**

General managers are the **news director’s boss** and usually have the final say about hiring on-air talent, especially anchors. Many GMs have a **background in sales** and a
weak understanding of journalism or what it takes to be a good reporter. They may be more inclined to judge a person based on appearance or presentation. The best general managers will stay out of the news director’s way and let him or her run their department. But those are a rare breed these days, since money is the driving force behind most station management.

News directors come and go much more quickly than general managers, so when you take a job don’t accept it just because you like the news director — I had one leave one month after he hired me. Ultimately, the general manager will be in charge of your fate, so it’s important to size this person up during the interview. Usually, the GM is called into the interview when the news director is serious about hiring someone, so take it as a good sign. If you can win them over, your tenure will be much more secure.

### 4.11.7 One Man Band

Many small markets still require reporters to be a “one-man band”, or shoot and edit all their own stories. If you are thinking about taking a job at a smaller station, consider the following pros and cons of life without a photographer.

I started as a one-man band in Redding, California 24 years ago and the station still operates the same way today. The logistics of being a one-man band are difficult. First, you have to lug around the camera, tripod, lights and batteries all at once — somewhere you may have room for a notebook and pen. This can be a real chore if you’re trying to quietly cover a council meeting or run after breaking news. The gear is heavy — 30 pounds or more. I still have a shoulder problem to this day from carrying around the camera.

The next challenge is shooting the interview and asking the questions at the same time. After you set the shot and walk over to ask your questions, the person will inevitably react by taking a step back or moving. I’ve had many interviews with ears or foreheads.

The fun really begins when you have to shoot your own standup out in the field. I’ve stopped passers-by, postmen and policemen for help. Usually, you’ll pull out a light
stand, adjust it to your height, focus the camera on the stand, press play, run to the stand, kick it out of the way and say your lines!

One man banding is honestly difficult, but you may not have a choice since so many small stations can’t or won’t hire photographers. They know beginning reporters are so eager for their first job that they will gladly drive themselves and schlep their gear around to cover stories, and they prey on this enthusiasm.

The positive side of shooting for yourself is that the experience will help you once you move to a larger station. Not only will you appreciate your photographer more, they’ll probably appreciate the fact that you know what it’s like to be on their side of the camera.

Apart from the physical challenges, being a one man band means the quality of your tape will not be as good as shooting your stories with the help of a photographer. Therefore, it is a little more difficult to move out of one-man-band stations into bigger and better stations.

If you have a choice, go with the station that has photographers. If you don’t have a choice, make the best of it and understand that it’s all part of the dues-paying process!

4.11.8 Equipment/Toys

The smaller the station, the fewer the “toys,” as they are called in the business. Toys can mean fancy digital editing equipment, satellite trucks and even helicopters. Naturally, doing a live shot from inside a helicopter hovering over a fire would look great on your resume tape, but don’t expect a small station to have one.

The most important equipment considerations at a small station are the cameras and editing machines. How old are they? Cameras that shoot on three-quarter inch tape are the dinosaurs of the business. Run away from stations still using those cameras (unless you have no choice). The next level is beta cameras, which are still acceptable. The cameras with the best quality now are DVDs, but some small stations haven’t invested in them yet.

Make sure the station has engineers who maintain the cameras and editing equipment. Nothing is more frustrating than a camera that’s constantly breaking down in the field, especially if you’re a one-man band.

It’s an added bonus if your station has at least one live truck. Remember, your ability to do live shots is one of the keys to success in this business. It will be hard to put them
on a tape if the station doesn't have the capability to go live from the field. Most small stations have invested in a live truck by now. If one station can't go live, but all the other stations in the same market can, you have to wonder about the commitment of the owners. In a word, they're probably cheap.

4.12 Contracts

If you have an option, it's probably better not to have a contract, especially for your first job. Television news contracts generally favor the employer, not the employee. Most contracts still allow the employer to fire the employee for something as broad as “failure to perform.” If the station doesn’t like you, they could use this clause to dismiss you for just about anything, so the contract does little to guarantee your employment.

A contract will also limit your ability to take another job. Some reporters have landed great jobs after spending only a few months at a small station (but heed earlier warnings about moving up before you are ready). A contract may prevent you from getting your big break.

Many smaller stations do not require reporters to sign contracts, while anchors are almost always under contract. The station wants to keep the people they've invested the most money in and who are the most recognizable.

Most news directors know reporters will use their station as a training ground for bigger and better jobs. Some news directors will even help reporters put together a tape and move on to bigger markets, as long as those reporters continue to work hard before they leave.

4.12.1 Out Clause

Many people believe you are asking for trouble if you request an out clause in your first contract. An out clause gives you the right to break your contract, with certain restrictions. I've had out clauses that would let me leave if I got a job in a top-forty market or my hometown market.

Out clauses often require you to give a certain amount of notice (30-60 days) and may be restricted to specific windows of time. For example, you usually won’t be allowed to leave during a ratings period. In addition, you may be limited to a one-month window after your first year.

Obviously the fewer restrictions in your out clause, the better. However, you may be wise to try and get the shortest contract you can (usually one year) instead of pushing
for an out clause. Your chances of getting an out clause will be much better after you’ve been at a station at least a year.

4.12.2 Morals Clause

Don’t plan on dancing on any tables while you are in television news because most stations include a morals clause in their contracts, and are serious about enforcing them. The morals clause states that the employee can be fired for any behavior that may reflect badly on the station. Your reputation will become the station’s reputation. A drunk driving arrest, public fight or outburst will not be forgotten and all of these have gotten people fired in the industry under this clause.

4.12.3 Breaking A Contract

So you’re six months into your contract and you get a call from the number one station in your hometown. Can you break your contract? Again, each station has different policies. Some will wish you well and let you leave. Others will threaten to take you to court and blackball you in the business.

A lot depends on whether a precedent has been set by other reporters: if another reporter has been allowed to break their contract without repercussions, you have a better chance at legally breaking yours. Now many stations are building punishments into their contracts. Some require you to pay back all moving expenses and even a portion of your salary.

If another station wants you badly enough they may be willing to foot the bill for you — but that seldom happens in small- to medium-sized markets. Instead, most stations will run the other way when they find out you are under contract. That’s why shorter contracts will give you the most flexibility.

Here’s another note — a 90-day probation period is standard in most situations. During that period, an employer can break the contract with you for any or no reason, so play it safe and follow the tips in this guide carefully, especially when you first join a station.

4.13 Unconventional Ways To Break In

This guide has given you some of the traditional methods to get into television news, but every once in a while people slip into the business through unconventional means.
4.13.1 Gimmicks

One news director was impressed with a different sort of resume. Inside a box was a large shell. Inside that was another one and another one after that. Inside the small, final shell was the applicant’s resume and a cover letter that read: “That’s me in a nutshell.” The news director admitted he had to contact the guy because he thought his approach was creative.

Daring to be a little different can get you noticed — just be sure to think your gimmick through before you act on it. One applicant sent a resume and tape inside a pizza delivery box. Too bad he hadn’t cleaned out the box — the resume ended up sticking to some leftover cheese! Before you try a gimmick, ask for advice from a few trusted professionals. You don’t want to go too far over the top, but if you can differentiate yourself from the rest of the pack in a unique way, do it.

4.13.2 Exotic Locales

You might consider working for a TV station in a foreign location where the competition is a little less fierce for jobs. For the longest time industry magazines were carrying ads from a TV station in Guam looking for entry-level reporters. Not many people ventured out there, but some who did found the experience gave them a solid foundation for their reporting career.

Karin Holly spent three years on the US territory and surrounding islands. She admits the working conditions were a bit “primitive” but says she learned a lot. “I loved my time there and made a lot of good friends,” she says. After her time in Guam, she landed a reporting job in Fort Myers, Florida — Market #62. Research the region first, but if you are adventurous you just might find an entry-level opportunity in some uncharted territories.

4.13.3 Photography

Some reporters broke into the business by becoming a photographer first. Since news departments are always short on staff, photographers are often sent out on stories by themselves. Another reporter or producer usually writes the story, but they probably would be willing to let the photographer give it a try. The more writing and actual reporting you can do as a photographer, the better.

Because it’s easy to get labeled as a photographer, let the news director and others on staff know about your ambitions to report. Offer to put a story together on your own time — on weekends and nights. This could serve as your demo tape. If the news director likes it, you’ll probably be able to do some stories on air.
4.13.4 Beauty Pageants

Traditional journalists hate to hear it, but the career ambition of many beauty pageant contestants is increasingly becoming “broadcast news.” Indeed, pageant success has launched a number of beauty queens into their first on-air reporting and anchoring jobs.

A Fox station in San Antonio, Texas gave a former Miss USA her first on-air job as a weekend anchor/reporter. That’s Market #37! The woman does have a graduate degree in English Literature and worked in the entertainment industry in Los Angeles, but the Miss USA title undoubtedly got her into a top-40 market despite her lack of reporting experience.

Again, the importance of appearance, presentation skills and public speaking abilities cannot be underestimated in this business. You don’t need to be a beauty queen, but having those attributes will certainly help your chances of landing a great job.

4.13.5 Acting

While acting experience alone isn’t enough to qualify someone for a job as a news reporter, it doesn’t hurt to have a background in dramatic arts — especially for anchors.

An acting background may help you get your foot in the door at a small market. But you will have to add to your experience by educating yourself about news and making all your mistakes in a small market before you try to move up.

One well-known actress went into TV news, took a job at a medium market as a reporter and then quickly moved up to an anchor job with a national network. Her lack of news experience showed on air, however, and she is no longer employed with that network.

Still, part of doing well in broadcast news is in the performance. Having a solid foundation as a journalist is important, but you won’t succeed on air unless you can do a certain amount of acting.
5. Being Successful

Success in television news means different things to different people. For some, success is being an evening anchor in a city they love where they can settle down and raise a family. For others, success means making it to a major market or the network. Many reporters will define success as breaking a big story, regardless of market size. Your definition of success is up to you: these following tips will help you get there.

5.1 Develop As A Journalist

If you want longevity in the business, you need to work on becoming the best possible journalist you can be. Be sure to consider the following in your quest to uncover the truth.

5.1.1 Get All Sides

There are indeed two sides to every story. If you don’t get both, you will not only be presenting a biased report, but you may be giving inaccurate information. Everyone has their own perception of events. If you put too much weight on what one person has told you, you will not be doing your job.

Sometimes tracking down the other side of the story is difficult, especially when you have deadlines to meet. Do everything you can to confirm the information you already have to avoid putting anything that’s not true on the air.
5.1.2 Never Assume

Just when you assume Joe Smith is spelled one way, it will surely turn out to be Jo Smythe. It’s better to ask a question that may seem obvious than to make a mistake on the air. Sometimes the simplest-sounding questions have led to great stories. Don’t be afraid to ask them—several times if you must. If someone is stonewalling you, keep asking the same question over and over, slightly re-wording it each time. This is a trick used by attorneys. Eventually, your subject will start to reveal more information.

Also remember that just because someone is accused of a crime doesn’t mean they did it. We are innocent until proven guilty in this country, so treat suspects with that respect. A prime example was the frenzy over Richard Jewell. The media made him a suspect in the Atlanta Olympics bombing, but he was never charged with any wrongdoing. Jewell later sued several media organizations and won.

5.1.3 Follow The Money

We’re not talking about salaries here. Money usually is the root of all news stories. Who stands to profit? Where did the money come from? Where did it go? Where is the politician getting his funding? How does their money source affect their voting? One politician in a county where I worked served jail time because she took bribes from her boyfriend to vote a certain way on a county contract: ugly, but true.

Money and love are strong motivators. Most taxpayers are concerned about their pocketbooks. A new project might sound great, but how much is it going to cost you and me? This is what your viewers want to know. Asking the right questions about money will help you become a better reporter.

5.1.4 Cultivate Sources

The key to getting good stories is cultivating good sources. Your sources could be the chief of police or the mayor’s secretary. In fact, secretaries often make the best sources because they can tip you off about what’s really going on or what’s about to happen. Spend some time when you can hanging out in their offices and talking to them. Ask them about their families, their job and what they do for fun. If they like you, they will take good care of you and get you in to see their bosses when you need an interview.

If you burn a source, you’ve probably lost them for good, so remember to treat them fairly and always be up front with them. If they are a good source and you’re taking an angle on a story they may not like, you should tell them in advance so they have a chance to respond.
Don’t take anything they say out of context, which is very easy to do in television news where the 15-second sound bite is key. So many people have bad experiences with the media and refuse to be interviewed again — by anyone. I’ve been turned down countless times for interviews because of what reporters at competing stations have done.

Take extra care to treat your sources well. If they tell you something is off the record, honor that and try to get the information elsewhere. If you get a great story but burn a source at the same time, they’ll probably never help you again.

5.1.5 Don’t Stage

Staging a story means asking an interview subject to do or say something specifically for the camera. Find a way to ask the right questions to get the response you need. Don’t coach people on their responses. This is unethical and can cost you your job.

5.1.6 Don’t Criticize The City

Most viewers are very protective about where they live. They can criticize it, but you as an outsider cannot. Avoid saying things like “It’s too cold,” or “The heat is miserable,” on the air (even if the weather is obviously unbearable). I’ve made both mistakes and had angry phone calls from viewers telling me to go back to California. Cover the news accurately, but if you must ad-lib on camera about your city or environment, say something nice or nothing at all.

5.1.7 Don’t Miss Deadlines

Avoid missing a deadline at all costs. It only takes one missed deadline to be branded as someone who can’t get the story done on time. If your tardiness becomes a habit, you stand a good chance of losing your job and almost no chance of moving up. No one wants to hire someone who can’t meet deadlines, and a prospective employer will surely find out about your reputation.

If you are having problems getting your story done, notify your producer or news director immediately. Learn to write quickly and take good notes while you are shooting the story. That way you won’t have to spend time logging all your field tapes when you get back to the station. Write as much as you can in the car on the way back to the station (unless you’re doing the driving, of course!).

TIP: I try to put all the background information in my notes, not on tape. Stop the camera as soon as you hear one or two good sound bites, then write down the rest. That way, you limit the amount of tape you have to search through when you sit down to write.
5.1.8 Be Flexible

If the idea of working long hours, weekends or being called in the middle of the night to cover a story bothers you, think about a different career. **You are expected to say “yes” to almost every request from your boss**, especially when you are just starting in television news. No story or shift should be beneath you. Some people have been fired for refusing to come in, even on Christmas Day.

5.2 Moving Up

The goal for most reporters and anchors in television news inevitably becomes to move up to a better-paying job in a bigger city. Here’s **what you need to do** to make progress after you get your first job.

5.2.1 Save Your Work

The last thing many reporters think about after doing a stellar live shot from a raging forest fire is dubbing off a copy of the newscast. You must do this **immediately**! I’ve seen many reporters very distressed to find out their live shot had been accidentally taped over the next day. It’s not enough to save your best packages. News directors want to see your live introductions and tags to the stories on set and out in the field. You never know when you’ll get to cover another dramatic news event (especially in a small market), so keep saving what you have.

5.2.2 Keep A Current Tape

When you least expect it, a news director might call and say they were passing through your city, liked your work and want to see a tape. Or, you could spot an opening at the station of your dreams. Trying to put a quality resume tape together at the last minute is **next to impossible**. You should always have a current tape on hand. Also send those tapes out to markets you might be eventually interested in for feedback. Ask the news director what areas you need to work on to get a job at his or her station.

5.2.3 Watch Yourself

This is hard to do for many of us, but you have to watch your on-air performance regularly to learn how to improve. Set your VCR or DVR to **record your newscast daily**. Are you developing bad or annoying habits? It’s easy to fall into certain patterns you don’t
know about, especially if you are an anchor. You don’t want to become too self-conscous, but if you notice something about yourself, chances are the viewers have too. Listen to your delivery and watch your demeanor. How do you compare to the reporters and anchors in major markets or on the networks? What are they doing differently?

5.2.4 Ask For Feedback

Most of us never ask for feedback because we’re often afraid of the answer, but it is the only way you can improve. Ask your news director what areas you need to work on. They seldom get that question and will value you even more as an employee who takes their job seriously. Everyone has room for improvement, especially if you are just starting in the business. Take your tapes to conferences and continue to get them critiqued.

I recently visited a large city where a reporter I used to work with has now landed a job. He always was an excellent journalist, but had a weak and nasally voice. When I listened to him again on air, I could barely tell it was the same person. He obviously spent some serious time working on his delivery and it paid off. Identify your weak areas and strive to improve them. It sounds obvious, but many people in TV never bother to find out their weaknesses, so your diligence will truly set you apart.

5.2.5 Treat Everyone With Respect

People who have jobs in television news off the air, like producers and assignment editors, move up more quickly than anchors and reporters. That means the tape editor you speak harshly to now could be in a position to squash your job chances at a bigger market later. I’ve seen this happen many times.

A reporter I once worked with was notorious for mistreating a young weekend producer. That young producer moved rapidly up the ranks, landing in New York after only a few years. When the reporter applied for a job at her station, the news director asked the producer’s opinion. Needless to say, the reporter wasn’t even considered.

Not only is being nice the right thing to do — acting egotistically or cocky will catch up to you eventually. Take this tip from a posting on TVSpy Watercooler:

“A few years ago, I jumped from [a tiny] market…to top twenty after nine months. I got a huge head and turned into a real b****. Naturally, I was let go. Since then, I’ve tried to recover by a) doing some real soul-searching and working on being a better person and b) working in two different markets in the 95-110 range.”
News directors have little tolerance for people with big egos and neither will your coworkers. Try to keep perspective, no matter how quickly you move up.

### 5.2.6 Enter Contests

Awards are given annually for a variety of broadcast news stories: series, features, breaking news, enterprise, medical, consumer…the list goes on. The **Emmys** are considered the most prestigious awards in the industry and are given on a regional basis. Similar market sizes compete against one another. The **Associated Press** also honors quality stories in a number of categories. Try to think about these awards if you are working on a really great story. Going just one extra mile during your reporting could make the difference between an award-winner and a fourth-place entry.

Award-winning stories will **strengthen your resume tape and get you noticed** by bigger stations. Tell your assignment editor or whoever handles the mail at your station that you’d like to know when contest notifications are sent out. You can find more information about some contests at the following websites.

- **The Emmys**
  - [http://www.emmyonline.org](http://www.emmyonline.org)

- **Investigative Reporters and Editors**
  - [http://www.ire.org/resourcecenter/contest](http://www.ire.org/resourcecenter/contest)

### 5.2.7 Don’t Burn Bridges

Try to exit gracefully, no matter how excited you are to be leaving a certain station. I’ve seen many reporters and anchors leave one market only to come back, having realized it wasn’t so bad after all. **Honor** your promises to your employers and be honest about your ambitions. Breaking a contract can get ugly and you have to decide whether the job opportunity is worth burning a bridge at your old station.

Television news is so unpredictable and such a small industry that you never know when you may need the people at your former station again. News directors move up too, just like reporters and anchors. Your boss today may be in a position to hire you at a much bigger station tomorrow.

### 5.2.8 Keep Your Contacts

Keep in touch through email or phone calls with people who leave your station for other markets, even if they go to a place you never would want to work. They may end up in
your dream town at their next job. Remember how well news directors respond to tapes that are hand-delivered to them by one of their own employees? It helps to have a network of friends at stations across the country. In small markets, even reporters at competing stations can be part of your network. Those contacts can help you move up, or help find you a job if you’re suddenly in a position where you really need one.

5.2.9 Consider Moving Or Freelancing

A career in broadcast news can take you to a wide variety of cities across the country. Most reporters make the majority of their career moves in their 20s and 30s while they are still single, since uprooting a family can be more challenging. If your goal is to be a reporter or anchor in a major market, you may have to make a number of moves to get there as you work your way up in market size.

Be sure to research a move thoroughly before you give up a job at a station in a city where you are happy. Remember that a raise in salary might not turn out to be much of an increase at all if the rent and taxes are higher where you are moving. Also a rise in market size doesn't necessarily mean an improvement in working conditions.

Homefair.com will help you calculate moving expenses and the difference in cost of living between where you are and where you’re headed.

Homefair.com
http://www.homefair.com

If you have a particular destination in mind, try to keep your career moves in the same region of the country. For example, if Seattle or Portland were your ultimate destination, you might go this route:

Twin Falls, Idaho (#194)
Boise, Idaho (#112)
Spokane, Washington (#75)

You might also consider moving to your ultimate destination after you’ve gained enough experience and offering to freelance. The amount of experience you’ll need will depend on the market size of your destination. If it’s a top 40, you’ll need to have five or six years experience in a medium-sized market first. For a smaller market, you might only need three years experience.
Many stations, especially in larger cities, are hiring local freelancers to report. I know a woman who got a reporting job in Seattle by packing up, moving there and freelancing first. Freelancing allows the stations to try you out without obligations or having to pay your moving expenses.

You must treat freelancing opportunities the way you would an internship: be flexible, available and willing to work. You’ll be well on your way to landing a job in your favorite city!

5.2.10 Consider A Job Off Camera

If you really love television news but are finding the competition a bit too fierce, you might consider taking a job behind the scenes. Producers and assignment editors are in great demand and move up in market size very quickly. Agents are even representing producers now and headhunters are constantly in search of them.

“If there were more students coming out of college wanting to be producers, there would be more people getting jobs in the business.”
—Tony Windsor, consultant and former news director

You can read the FabJob Guide to Become a Television Producer and decide if this career might be for you! It covers working as a producer on all kinds of television productions, including news shows. A free sample of this guide is available at the fabjob.com website.

FabJob Guide to Become a Television Producer
http://www.FabJob.com/producer.asp

The lure of the camera does seem to attract many people, but you might have a brighter future off air. If you find you enjoy it, don’t dismiss the possibility!
5.3 Success Stories

So how have others succeeded in landing their first jobs on air? Here are two success stories that provide valuable lessons.

**A KRCR-TV Applicant**

Persistence earned one woman her first on-air reporting job in Northern California, even though she had spent several years working in public relations after college.

Her dream had always been to work as a television news reporter so she continued pursuing a job in the industry. Her only reporting experience was in college and as an intern. When the woman attended an Associated Press seminar in California she met some people who worked for Gary Gunter at KRCR. She told them she was interested in getting a reporting job and kept in touch with them through email.

When a reporting position opened up her contacts at KRCR notified her. She sent a tape to them and asked them to show it to Gunter. “With that kind of red carpet, when that tape comes in, I look at it,” notes Gunter. “She was a real smart person networking that way.”

Although the tape was not outstanding, Gunter liked the woman’s persistence. She called him and volunteered to drive several hours to the station to meet with him. “I was very impressed with the in-person interview,” he says, also noting that she was dressed “exceedingly well.”

He set up a later date for her to go out in the field with a crew and shoot an audition story. Gunter asked the woman if she knew what she was getting herself into — long hours and a huge salary cut! She told him she was dying to take the job, and that she shook with excitement every time she passed a news crew.

In the end, it was the woman’s enthusiasm that got her hired, but it certainly helped that she had attended that seminar and kept her contacts. “She was twice as hyped and excited as any other candidate,” he says. “I thought, ‘Why not take the chance?’ She got hired because of her personal sell job.”
Jim Burress

Like the woman in the KRCR success story, Jim Burress had wanted to be a television news reporter ever since he was a child. He started pursuing his goal early by managing to anchor a news program called “Teen Talk” while still in high school. Later, knowing how valuable it would be to write well, he chose to major in English at a small liberal arts college in Indiana.

Before long, Jim was working at the campus radio station. The station didn’t have a news department, so Jim created his own opportunity. He offered to deliver three-minute news updates every day if they gave him a chance to read the news on air. Not only did he get that chance, he was eventually promoted to general manager of the radio station.

But Jim didn’t stop there — TV was his real ambition. His junior year, he used a contact he had through a cousin at a TV station in Terre Haute (Market #152). Jim applied for a job as an intern at the station, even though it was a 90-minute drive away from his school. It took several months and a number of phone calls, but Jim finally got the internship. He began making the commute around his class schedule for the unpaid internship. Then, he got two big breaks.

First, he was in the field with a photographer who was teaching him how to shoot when a news event happened. It wasn’t a major story — just a stoplight outage and traffic tie-up — but in small markets like Terre Haute, it was news enough. Jim covered the story, doing all the interviews and writing it later at the station. Since he had done all the work, the news director agreed to let him voice it on the air.

He made his second big impression while he was attending a college radio conference in New York. At 4:30 one morning he made his way down to Rockefeller Center where the Today Show is taped and got in the front lines of the outdoor audience. Jim waved a home-made sign that said, “I’m an intern, talk to me.” And it worked! Weatherman Al Roker gave Jim a few seconds on national TV and his bosses back at the Indiana station (an NBC affiliate) took notice.
After that, Jim was offered a **full-time paid reporting position** just three months into his internship. He worked long hours—12-hour days, weekends—and used half his paycheck on gas, but says it was worth it. After finishing college, he moved on to a position as an associate producer and backup anchor at an Indianapolis TV station, and later worked as anchor/reporter at a station in Bowling Green.

His advice to job seekers: “Don’t give up. You have to set yourself apart from everybody else. Make yourself valuable.”

While Jim may think he got two lucky breaks, those breaks didn’t just happen; he made them happen. If he hadn’t taken the **initiative** to learn to shoot with the photographer, he wouldn’t have been there when news happened.

And he certainly wouldn’t have gotten on the *Today Show* without **ingenuity** and **motivation**.
6. Conclusion

This guide has covered numerous aspects of breaking into television news and succeeding. Here are the most important themes stressed by news directors, consultants and reporters alike:

**Internships**

A good education helps, but **nothing is more important** than getting an internship that will actually train you as a reporter. Go to a small station, not a large one for your internship. Learn to shoot, edit, write and report. Ask for advice from anyone who will give it to you. Try to get as many stories as you can for a resume tape during your internship and get your tape critiqued early and often, while you still have a chance to make some changes.

**Road Trips**

Don’t expect jobs to come to you — you have to seek them out. News directors see hundreds of tapes that all look about the same to them, especially on an entry-level. Meet them in person and show them your dedication and passion for television news. Often, those qualities will be enough to **set you apart from the other applicants**. Going on road trips is the **best way to get one-on-one meetings with news directors**. It shows you have the commitment you’ll need to make it in this business.

**Persistence**

Most news directors, especially in **small markets**, say they value persistence in reporter candidates. I know a reporter who jumped from the number three station in Fort Myers, Florida (Market #62) to the number one station in Atlanta (Market #8) without an agent, but with sheer persistence.

He **sent a tape** to the station, called the news director and found out he was one of the top four candidates. He **kept calling** until he got the interview and eventually the job. The news director admitted that the reporter’s persistence clinched it for him. Respect employers who say they don’t want calls, but persistence will ultimately be **the key** in landing your first on-air job and succeeding in the business of television news.

**Good Luck!**
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