

source \ sors \ n 1: ORIGIN, BEGINNING 2: a supplier of information 3: the beginning of a stream of water

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Source Types

I classify most sources into 10 general categories. There are many nuances and variations, of course. And this light-hearted and simplistic list is not meant to denigrate the important, vital role of sources – the lifeblood of our profession.

Interviewing is an art. Assessing motivation is a critical skill and essential to developing an interviewing strategy that compliments the personalities of both you (yes, you will need one) and your potential source.

Bureaucrat Source

“I despise you, but you’re useful.”

Frequent types: politicians; government supervisors; law enforcement supervisors.

Strategy: Be relentlessly cordial. Never show frustration. When appropriate, share information that you kept out of your story because it was unsubstantiated or not fair. Demonstrate how your ethics shaped the story. Share personal tidbits; make the source know you. Your goal is to differentiate yourself from the rest of the media.

Risks: May not hesitate to sell you out. Remember the turtle and scorpion story? A scorpion is always a scorpion.

Ethical Source

“I want to help but I won’t stray from the boundaries of my job.”

Frequent Types: spokespersons; attorneys; prosecutors.

Strategy: Build respect and trust by NEVER asking the person to stray beyond job boundaries. Build rapport over time. Share your reporting goals; express your sensitivity to the difficulty of the person’s position. Find out what makes the person professionally unhappy, and then conversationally drill in on that soft spot. Share your own job frustrations. Ask if there are ways to get what you want, but don’t ask that person for it. More often than not, the person will form a valuable off-the-record relationship.

Risks: May not hesitate to reveal your plans and words to supervisors.

Puppy Dog Source

“I want to be you. Instead, I’ll shadow your every step.”

Frequent types: whistleblowers; street contacts; low level employees

Strategy: Be accessible within reason. Let the person into your world, but try to limit access to details. This person wants lots of attention, lots of stroking. Call this source and share your enthusiasm, but carefully explain your boundaries, demonstrate your

professionalism. This kind of source often wants immediate results. Educate them about the process – verifying; record gathering; interviewing.

Risks: May run to another media outlet if ignored too long, or simply patronized.

Reluctant Source

“I’m not sure I really want to be involved.”

Frequent types: mid-level bureaucrats; private company executives; victims of injustice

Strategy: Absolute honesty – always. Demonstrate that their concerns are YOUR primary concern. Layer the interview process; build gradually. Identify their worst fear and work on it. They often have a very private agenda.

Risks: May disappear once their agenda is fulfilled.

Ivory Tower Source

“Snatch the pebble from my hand.”

Frequent types: professors; doctors; researchers

Strategy: Three most important rules: research; research; research. Flatter them by saying you read their work, and then pick out a detail.

Risks: They may bolt if they find out you’re faking it

Momentary Source

“I’ll never see you again.”

Frequent types: breaking news scenes

Strategy: Identify yourself first. Avoid journalist stereotypes – how you feeling now? – and stand away from the pack when possible. Explain that you ARE doing a story and wanted to know if there was anything they would like to add, something readers should know. NEVER ask if you can ask them a question.

Scrooge Source

“I hate my job. I hate my co-workers. I’ll give you whatever you want.”

Frequent types: Government workers; mid-level law enforcement supervisors; clerical staff

Strategy: Despite their anger, they will respect your neutrality. Demand records. Make them feel central to the story. Capitalize on their need to be wanted; praise their insights.

Risks: May abandon you if they feel ignored

Barricaded Source

“You’ll never penetrate my defenses.”

Frequent types: institutional bureaucrats such as hospital executives; military; elected officials

Strategy: Send the message that you are never going away. Show you don’t need their blessing to gather information. Call frequently with updates on your progress and pepper them with e-mails to document your willingness to share your findings (I found another lawsuit that you settled for wrongful death).

Risks: They may never crack. Or, they may try to play slick semantic games to slip an error into your story as a way to discredit you.

Cloistered Source

"You'll never understand. You're not one of us."

Frequent types: Ultra-religious followers; highly-skilled professionals

Strategy: Research is essential; find common ground. Listen carefully; take lots of notes – show them every word is valuable. Let them know that they can be a central expert in the story, but there are many others willing to fill the role if necessary. Explain why you want THEM more than any other.

Risks: Scant tolerance for sloppy research. Like a switch, they can click you off without remorse.

Headline Source

"I'll tell you whatever I think you want to hear – even if it's not quite the truth."

Frequent types: politicians; casual contacts; most anyone

Strategy: Constantly probe for inconsistencies. Ask them HOW they know the information; trace it to the source. Ask for records. If they are a long-term source, teach them how to be a better source.

Risks: May unintentionally mislead you or waste your time.