

Prenatal Care for Projects

How to give conceive, grow and launch
a successful 'big story'

Tips from top investigative editors,
compiled by David Boardman of The Seattle Times

CONCEPTION

Getting a project off to a strong start

1. **START AT STREET LEVEL.** The best projects are seldom hatched by editors in meetings. Often, they come from reporters on a specialized beat, or those who spot a trend or an idea off the news. Sometimes, they come from editors who have talked to a range of reporters and suddenly realize there are common themes emerging from different reporters in different beats. Many projects hatched in meetings look out of touch, or like they were created simply to win prizes.
2. **IDENTIFY QUESTIONS, THEN FIND ANSWERS.** Too many projects are “investigations of nouns,” ponderous tomes that read like government reports or academic papers. Make sure you start with a fundamental question, the answer to answer to which you – and readers – genuinely don’t know or couldn’t easily guess. It’s OK to have a thesis early on; by the time you’ve decided to launch a project, you should have good reporting in hand. But be careful not to simply set out to prove your theories before you’ve fully reported the story.
3. **BE STINGY WITH PROJECTS.** Most good ideas are best handled as normal stories, rather than as projects. Put your idea to a rigorous test. Does it really need to be a project, or is it better as a temporary beat? Is it best as just a focus of coverage? A paper does relatively few projects in a year. Since the really good ones require lots of time and staff, a paper should be stingy in getting into them.
4. **BUILD THE RIGHT TEAM.** Decide early whether the project will be done by a single reporter or by a team. Make that decision based on what’s best for that particular story, not based on newsroom politics or turf issues. Make sure all the key needs of that story – document work, source cultivation, database reporting, narrative writing – are properly covered, and that everyone understands what the others bring to the table.
5. **MAKE IT LOCAL.** The best projects have particular relevance to local readers. If you live in a city with few elderly people, don’t jump on nursing homes just because that’s the hot national story. That’s a great project in Florida, not necessarily for you.
6. **THINK BIG.** Start local but don’t be afraid to think regionally, nationally or internationally. Keep your eyes open for broader patterns in what you find.
7. **BE COURAGEOUS.** Going into the project, make sure there’s a good chance you’ll have something new and powerful to say. Big projects that are just compilations of views, or opinions, or voices, or repeats of stuff other papers have done, are often wishy-washy and deadly. If you’re going to put in the time and energy, be prepared to say something powerful and to have impact.

GESTATION

Helping a project grow and thrive

1. **START THE WRITING PROCESS EARLY.** Don't wait until you're finished reporting to begin writing. Draft accounts of face-to-face interviews and trips while the details are still fresh. Write periodic story memos for your editor and the other members of your team; they'll help you keep your bearings. Think about the lede and the nut graph, over and over and over again.
2. **HIT SENSITIVE SUBJECTS EARLY.** If this is an investigative project, don't wait until the last minute to get comment from its targets. Anybody worth investigating will figure out sooner rather than later what you're doing. So talk to them early on to get basic profile material, comment and clues on where to look for more dirt.
3. **FOCUS, FOCUS, FOCUS ... AGAIN.** Revisit your thesis constantly. Ask yourself, where does the reporting we're doing now fit into the thesis? Does the thesis need revision? Does the project need to grow – or shrink? Tighten, tighten, tighten. If you can't describe your topic in a sentence, it's not focused enough.
4. **THINK VISUALLY.** Bring photographers, artists and designers in early. Include them in weekly story meetings. Make all the elements of your project – words, pictures, graphics – will work in powerful harmony. The only way to achieve it is to live it.
5. **TAKE THE VITALS – AND BE WILLING TO ABORT.** Do an unforgiving assessment of the project-in-progress. Sure, you have put a lot of time and energy into it. But is it worth spending the additional resources it will take to bring the story home? Consider the opportunity costs. And is it worth spending the space it will take to tell? If not, cut your losses. Remember that it's OK to report yourself out of a story. Don't let newsroom pressures overtake facts.
6. **STOP REPORTING AND REVIEW WHAT YOU HAVE.** Even if the project is clearly headed toward publication, call a moratorium on reporting before you're finished. Write up what you have, in abstract or outline form, and see where the holes are. If appropriate, do a master chronology that will help identify gaps. Then get out and fill those holes.
7. **BUILD A STRUCTURE THAT WORKS FOR READERS.** As a team, begin to build your presentation. How can you make this story both complete and compelling? Do you really need five parts, or can you do it in three? Or one? Are you telling the same story over and over in different locales or with different characters, or does each part produce its own gems of understanding?

BIRTH

Bringing the project home to readers

1. **LEAVE TIME FOR WRITING.** If you're going to invest the time to report a project, invest adequate time for writing, editing, rewriting, and re-editing. Far too often, good reporting gets lost in weak writing. And remember, chunks of it can be done along the way.
2. **DECIDE WHO WRITES.** It's really hard to write in tandem. On stories with multiple reporters, often one reporter should function as a lead writer to give piece a unifying voice.
3. **WRITE WITH AUTHORITY.** Effective stories have the correct proportion of assertions and proofs -- direct observation, numbers, quotes, anecdotes, etc. Without adequate proofs, the story is unconvincing. Without assertions, the story isn't making a clear point.
4. **BORROW TOOLS OF LITERATURE.** Don't forget you're telling a story. Many of the devices of literary journalism -- narrative, characters, conflict, scenes, motive, dialogue -- can be used in investigative pieces. Even little bits of those elements add layers of meaning.
5. **AIM HIGH AND PARE RELENTLESSLY.** Make the story sing by attention to wordcraft, and make it compelling by not clogging it up with excess.
6. **DON'T FORGET THE NUGGETS.** Somehow, those tantalizing little nuggets that thrilled everybody early on -- the inspired analogy, the great detail about a revealing habit, the trenchant quote -- often get left out because they were forgotten during the ordeal of writing. Go back and make sure any wonderful tidbits -- the kind of stuff you would entertain people with when you talked about the story -- aren't simply overlooked.
7. **PREVIEW THE STORY.** After editing, ask a small group of reporters and editors unfamiliar with the topic to read it. If parts of it confuse them or slow them down, fix them.
8. **LEAVE SOME LEGS.** Start anticipating what strong followup stories might be, and be sure to leave yourselves room to pursue them. Hold back a zinger or two you can pursue in the days and weeks after publication, to keep the story alive.
9. **SOLICIT REACTION.** Send your stories out to the sources and subjects for their reaction. Often -- sometimes unwittingly -- they'll give you good ideas for follow stories.
10. **CELEBRATE!** Take the time to reward yourself and your colleagues.