

## Rookie Tips- Your First Assignments

1. **Understand your assignment.** Know the angle or focus before you start. Discuss this with your editor. Also talk about who the sources will be and what information you need to get. Do research. Read past DE stories, use Google, ask your editor, your adviser or more experienced reporters what they know about the subject.
2. **Think about your interviews.** Write down the questions that you know you need to get answered. Don't be afraid to follow up or to veer down different paths, but make sure you get the crucial information. Avoid questions that can be answered with "yes" or "no." Plan questions that can elicit expanded answers. Ask "Why?" Ask it frequently. Or, "How does that work?"
3. **Listen to your editor.** Your editor is your boss. If your editor tells you to call more sources, do it. If your editor tells you to rewrite your lead, do it. It's OK to stand up for yourself and it's OK to have a different opinion, but your editor is ultimately responsible for your story.
4. **Reporters and photographers: Coordinate with one another.** If you are a reporter, talk to photo right away about your assignment. Ask them if they have any ideas for illustrating your story. Photographers should also seek out the reporter whose story they are assigned to right away. Go to the assignment together if at all possible. You probably will get a better story and better photo that way.
5. **Be on time for interviews and shoots.** Being late is unprofessional and annoying. It makes people unwilling to deal with you again.
6. **Be polite in interviews and shoots.** Academics generally want to be addressed as "doctor." Do this unless the source says she would rather you didn't.
7. **Don't get steamrolled.** Some sources think they can get away with pushing you around because you're young, a student and new at this. Be polite but firm. If you need to ask more questions because you don't understand what the engineering professor meant by "hi-joeing the gizzlewomper," do so. Say something like, "I'm concerned about making this accurate, so could you please explain to me what that means in a way my readers will understand?"

8. **Use multiple sources, including data, if available.** Three sources per story is the minimum, not the goal. And make sure that if one source criticizes someone or some policy, you find someone to respond to the criticism.
9. **Remember that not every source needs to go into your story.** Some will repeat things others have said better. Some will tell you little new. Cull the dross and keep the gold. Everyone you talk with helps you understand the story better.
10. **Never promise anyone that they will be in the paper or online.** Your photo or story might be scheduled for Wednesday's paper but that could change. It's OK to say you are working on something for a particular day, but make sure sources understand there is no guarantee when it will appear.
11. **Never allow sources to review your work.** We don't let people see stories before they run in the paper. If asked, simply say that the DE, like virtually all news organizations, has a policy prohibiting that. It is OK to read back their quotes for accuracy, if need be.
12. **Use a recorder.** Take notes, too. Make sure you know where on the recorder key information is. It is vital to have a recording in case a source claims to have been misquoted or taken out of context.
13. **Don't over-quote.** Use direct quotations when someone says something better than you can write it, says something startling or says something that summarizes the point of your story. Short, pithy quotes are better than long, rambling ones.
14. **Ask how can you reach the source later if your editor has questions.**
15. **Make sure you understand the story when you start to write it.** (See Tip 1.) Ask your editor for help if you don't. Do not put something in a story that you do not understand.
16. **The inverted pyramid is your friend.** Use it.
17. **The nut graf is vital.** Make sure you have one.
18. **Include context and background.** These make stories more meaningful and understandable.

19. **Tell me something new.** Don't state the obvious, don't generalize and don't be vague. What is most important? That's your lead.
20. **Attribute information.** Use a form of the verb "to say." Every time. It's the invisible verb.
21. **Be concise.** Don't use three words when one will do. For example, "made a decision" means "decided."
22. **Use strong verbs.** Eschew adverbs and adjectives. Let the reader decide if the crash was "horrific." If you've used strong verbs and good description, you don't need any embellishment.
23. **Use transition.** Link paragraphs to make a story flow. Repeat a key word or phrase from the preceding paragraph; move from the general to the specific. If need be, use "however" or "on the other hand" or something similar to signal a clear break.
24. **Edit your cutline or story before you turn it in to your editor.** Double-check names, titles, addresses. Ask yourself if you left something important out. Use spellcheck but remember that it doesn't know that you meant "pore" but wrote "pour." It only knows that "pour" is spelled correctly.
25. **Have fun.** As tough as it can be, this job should also be fun. It's most fun when you do it well.