

Tell me a story I won't forget

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You have a hard-hitting data story in the works. Let's make sure it's not boring.

Tell a story. Above all else, journalists need to be truth-tellers and storytellers. Your story is no good if no one can understand it, or, if no one wants to read it. Use narrative writing to wind readers through an investigation. Weave in bits of your data analysis when relevant, but never to show off. Build suspense. Be descriptive but never flowery. Remember why the story must be told.

Use data to guide you to the story. Data is just another subject to "interview." Your findings should lead you to ask more questions, find examples, and build a narrative. Don't only focus on the bad. Who is doing something right? Find out how and why.

Look for characters and perfect examples. Tell your story through people and examples. That's what people remember. Find examples that explain your premise. Always make the extra call and don't give up. Flawed examples ruin great stories.

Gather mountains of information as you report. You won't use most of it. Get it anyway. Ask for police reports, autopsies, 911 calls, medical records, diaries, old photos. Interview sources as many times as they will let you. Don't be too shy or too lazy to pick up the phone and ask another question or check a fact.

Don't be afraid of the gray areas. Although we're searching for perfect examples, acknowledge the complexities of a situation or character. Life is rarely black and white. Readers understand nuance so pointing it out gives you credibility and is the right thing to do.

State what you don't know about your data. Admit your weaknesses. Data has limits. Don't be afraid to point those out. Explain what you don't or can't know. Transparency gives you credibility.

Stay organized. Develop a system for your data, documents and note-taking. Keep copies of your original data and mark it as such so you don't get confused. Track records requests in a spreadsheet, noting when you sent them, when you followed up and when the documents arrived. Beyond not letting requests fall through the cracks, this can aid your storytelling. "It took 11 months for the agency to produce records." Create a "quote" file and dump brilliant quotes into it for safekeeping. Or, develop a system where you asterisks smart things people say in interviews.

Don't be such a baby about editing. If someone does not understand your story, it is you who failed to do your most basic job. Pay attention to your editor's comments and be open to making changes.