

Story ideas

Story ideas from the 2001 ASNE High School Journalism Institute

Teachers attending the 2001 ASNE High School Institute at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind., say it's a real challenge to get their newspaper staffers to come up with story ideas. Since professional journalists are expected to develop the majority of stories that they work on, the teachers at the Institute brainstormed a few ways to get their students to take the lead.

Here's a sampling:

- Regularly ask, "Are we writing stories that reflect the entire school and not just one group of students?"
- Brainstorm around a single topic. For example, a discussion about the school cafeteria could lead to stories on the nutritional values of the food, whether accommodations are made for vegetarians, why students tend to segregate themselves by race at the lunch tables, the hard work that cafeteria workers do for generally low wages, the selling of sodas and restaurant chain food in the cafeteria, efforts to recycle, etc.
- Another example is to build on an offhand comment like, "Biology class is so boring." Keep asking "why?" Interesting story angles will tumble out, such as outdated books, an overcrowded class, no labs, no funds for field trips, etc.
- Ask the students what their friends are talking about.
- While conducting a post-mortem of the current edition of the paper, be sure to ask which story was the big "talker" or piqued the most interest among readers? Get the students to break it down into why a particular story "clicked" with teens.
- On Monday, ask students what they did over the weekend. At one school, this led a story about how the lives of today's teens are busier than what their parents experienced during their youth, from less sleep to more hours spent at after-school jobs.
- Ask the students about their hobbies. Let them do almost all the talking!

Teachers attending the 2001 ASNE High School Institute at the University of Texas at Austin brainstormed "evergreen" story ideas that can be made interesting with a wide range of sources.

- What kinds of cars do students and teachers drive?
- Tips on staying physically fit and healthy.
- Favorite doughnuts and snack foods.
- Shadow community professionals -- interview them about their careers, etc.
- Profile famous alums.
- Find out about historical markers near school and profile the school's history.
- Migrant workers in your community -- they may be the parents of some of the students at your school.
- Food recipes -- after-school snacks, ethnic foods.
- Run a trivia contest in every issue.
- What do you feed a football player (training and diet regimens).
- Profile students with parents who teach on campus.
- Car care tips.
- Interview teachers who graduated from your campus.
- Zero-tolerance laws (students who've been punished under these laws and the views of administrators and parents).
- First impressions of high school freshman (contrast with seniors).
- Sound off -- pro & con about an issue (with headshots of interviewees).
- Project stories on health issues such as anorexia or diabetes.
- Parents' careers and the world of work.
- Students in the digital age

Teachers from the 2001 ASNE High School Institute at Hampton University in Hampton, Va., came up with the following ideas for generating story ideas:

- Check local and daily newspapers
- Check Internet sites of teen interest and schools
- Check online student newspapers
- Talk with the school's public relations person
- Talk with coaches, guidance counselors, secretaries and the principal
- Talk with the principal's advisory group or cabinet
- Talk with student council members and the sponsor
- Survey teachers about unusual assignments, clubs they sponsor, students in their classes who are involved in interesting activities.
- "Beat Letters" for all clubs, organizations, teams, department heads, PTA, custodian or maintenance works, librarians.
- Contact parent groups, such as athletic boosters or band boosters
- Walk around the school and take note of posted fliers
- Look at the sports calendar, district calendar and school calendar
- Ask your friends what they would like to see in the paper
- Survey students in the school newspaper or as a class assignment
- Contact cafeteria workers, bus drivers, maintenance personnel, etc.
- Watch local and national news programs for stories that might interest your audience
- Exchange newspapers with other schools
- Brainstorm in class
- Seek out students, coaches, teachers, staff, alumni or clubs to profile
- Contact the alumni group
- Check out other media for new releases, such as CDs, movies or books
- "Play Detective" -- ask questions about things that have sparked your curiosity
- Ask your peers to write letters to the editor, columns, editorial cartoons or to participate in "man-on-the-street" columnns
- Check out school policies or the code of conduct
- Attend school board meetings