

SOURCERY: THE ARCANES ART OF GETTING PEOPLE TO TELL THE TRUTH

1. **ASK FOR HELP.** If you ask people to tell you everything they know, that is a precious possession not readily surrendered. But people like to be asked for their help. Ask them to help you understand what is happening. That is what you want, isn't it? You're a little confused and lost, and you need help in figuring things out. In helping you, people just may tell you what they know.
2. **BE PREPARED.** Know what you're talking about. Know what they're talking about. Study the subject—and the terminology of the topic. Know what your questions are. Know what the answers could be. Don't parade your knowledge. But use it to prompt discussion—and replies.
3. **LISTEN.** Shut up and listen. A good reporter is a good listener. You shouldn't be trying to tell people everything you know. You want to get what they know. Sometimes the best questions are "Uh-huh," "Why?" "How?" "What do you mean?" and "I don't understand," the short questions which keep people talking, while you keep listening.
4. **BE HONEST.** You want your sources to be honest with you, don't you? Be honest with them, if you want to build mutual trust. That doesn't mean putting everything out on the platter before the first question. But do try to be candid, rather than coy. If you're working on a story, say so. Take people part of the way into your confidence. Maybe they will do the same for you.
5. **TALK TO EVERYONE.** There is no magic formula for finding sources. Figure out everyone who might know something about what you're looking for. Talk to them all. Keep asking. Go back and forth. You may find a piece here, a piece there. Getting stories is akin to assembling puzzles—without knowing how many pieces there are or what the final picture may look like.
6. **SEE PEOPLE FACE-TO-FACE.** You can't look a telephone in the eye. And if you're someone's office or living room, they can't hang up or put you on hold or ask you to call back another time—when they won't be in. In fact, few people know how to throw you out gracefully. So stay, and try to keep asking questions. Walk into an office two minutes after quitting time, when the secretary has gone but the boss with all the work to do is still there—and has no more appointments or ringing phones to interrupt him or her at that hour. Knock on doors at home at night and on weekends. Show up unexpectedly. Often people will see you to find out what you want.
7. **GO BACK. GO BACK AGAIN AND AGAIN.** Keep knocking on doors. You may feel foolish, but be polite and persist. Keep asking for help. It may seem hard to ask questions when you may feel foolish, but remember one rule: the only way you're certain of never getting the answer is to be too embarrassed to ask the questions. One reporter's axiom: "There aren't any embarrassing questions—just embarrassing answers."
8. **BE PLEASANT. MAKE SMALL TALK.** Be humble. After all, you don't know everything, you need to help, or you wouldn't be there. And you should to be sympathetic, when it's merited. Try to be a friend—but always remember you are a reporter.
9. **REMEMBERING THE OBVIOUS QUESTION.** That's not as easy as it sounds. You can get caught up in the small talk, the story-telling, the news angle, the listening, the good humor and charm of a source. But remember what you came for. Identify the question before you go in, and keep working on it, keep asking. If people ignore or evade your key question, rephrase it, ask in it in different ways, as many times as you must until you do have an answer that's understandable and believable.
10. **CHALLENGE YOUR SOURCES.** Contradict them a little. Don't accept the easy explanation. Say you don't understand, say it doesn't make sense from what you know from

other people. Ask them, "How can you be certain?" Let them prove it to you—more details, other names, any documents.

11. NEVER TRUST YOUR SOURCE. At least not completely. Double-check. Look not only for corroboration, but also for contradictions, for evidence to the contrary. Not even your best source has a perfect memory.

12. DON'T SOCIALIZE WITH REPORTERS ALL THE TIME. Socialize with the people whose stories have not already been in print. Remember all the friends you ever met. Sometimes the person you once dated in college will grow up to be top official of the Justice Department. Never underestimate anyone as a potential source.

13. IF YOU WANT TO PROTECT YOUR SOURCES, don't tell anyone, particularly your fellow reporters who are (with the exception of you, of course) the worst blabbermouths, in the world. If you want a sensitive source to talk with you, he or she decide whether to trust you. And your word must be golden. A bad reputation will quickly ruin even the best reporter.

14. YOU SET THE RULES, and you clarify the terms on which you're talking. If this is background, or not-for-attribution, make certain you and the source have the same definition of that, and recognize that the information will be used. It's up to you to avoid any misunderstanding. Spell out the terms, if necessary, at the outset so you both understand them. Don't take off-the-record information—that's unusable in any form, and let your sources know that. Most of them want to tell you something anyway, and will do so, at the least, on the background basis that allows you to pursue confirmation elsewhere. Don't let the source change the rules at the end of the evening. Your job is to tell stories to the public, not to your grandchildren someday.

15. GIVE YOUR WORST ENEMY A FAIR-SHAKE. Always give someone his or her best defense in the printed story. Even if you don't believe it, let the readers have a chance to for themselves. You may earn that person's respect. He or she may even tell you the full story later on.

16. BE CRUEL. THIS IS THE UNWRITTEN RULE. When all is done—but not yet said—let the facts fall where they may. You have no friends now. You are a reporter—tell the truth. But don't pass judgment on people unnecessarily. You're a reporter, not God. Let people's deeds speak for themselves.

17. ALWAYS SAY THANK YOU. Say thank you at the end of the day. Go back when the story is over and say thank you again. Say thank you to the sources even when nothing is happening. An honest thank you is as rare and as encouraging as a good listener.

18. KEEP TRYING. Keep working. It is the drudgery of making sure of details that uncovers the unexpected. A sage of this profession has said, "I've met a lot of lucky reporters. I've never known a single lazy lucky reporter."