

How to Dig Like a Journalist - Not for Dirt but for Gold

Patricia McLinn

Eureka! I have found it. And it's gold. Is there any better feeling for a writer than coming up with the gold that can make a character breathe, a scene live and a story sing? Not bad for a hunk of rock.

All you have to do is dig it up. I know you can do it, because if I learned this, so can you.

I'll start at the beginning (unusual for me, but that's another article) when I was the most inept gold-digger around. Entering the Medill School of Journalism's masters program at Northwestern University, I was given a "beat" of social services on Chicago's North Side and told to produce feature and news stories. "But how do I find these social service?" I whined. (Hey, my undergrad degree is in English Composition. Essays, creative writing and the library I knew. Social services? Not a clue.) "You find them any way you can," said the instructor, "because nobody's going to help you."

For the rest of that course, I spent hours on the phone with a friendly priest. No, I wasn't seeking religious counsel. He'd been mentioned in an article on area activists and was willing to tell me about other groups. Saved!

But I'd experienced the panic of being ill-equipped, and that was the stick - liberally applied - that pushed me to learn digging skills. The carrot came during a paper on the 1919 World Series (the Series the "Black" Sox threw - see the movies *Eight Men Out* and *Field of Dreams*.) I'd seen a mention of one of the clean White Sox still living in the Chicago area. On a lark I called people with that last name - and found him! Some seven decades later, this man could tell me every pitch he threw in big games, before 1919 and after. But about that season he would say not one word. All the books, all the research, all the miles of

microfilm - none of it brought the pain of that scandal alive the way his eloquent silence did.

Unearthing that nugget led to two tenets I've followed for journalism, writing and everyday life:

-- Whatever it is that you could possibly want to know in this world (and quite a bit out of this world), someone out there knows it.

-- Since the knowledge exists there has to be a way to find it.

Journalists need digging methods that won't alert those who have a vested interest in keeping the dirt hidden. So journalists comb public papers, file Freedom of Information Acts, sift reams of numbers and, yes, occasionally slog through garbage.

We, on the other hand, are looking for gold and - here's the best part -- in this case, it's easier to dig for gold than for dirt. Most of the folks holding the gold are not only willing, but downright eager, to hand it over. All we have to do is find them.

Now, where to start ...

1.) Libraries.

Libraries are wonderful resources - librarians are even better. So after you've mined the card catalog for the topics you can think of, tell the reference librarian what you've looked at and ask if s/he has other ideas.

Don't forget the "Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature." Yes, the Internet has made it less essential, but there are still many periodicals not on the Internet, especially the arcane ones that can produce treasure.

2.) Books.

Check the index, rather than the table of contents. The table of contents lists what's important to the author. The index is a better gauge of how much information the book will have for you. Rule of Thumb: The fewer listings on your topics in the index, the less likely it is you'll find new information.

If you find a fantastic book, note information about the author - you might want to try to get in touch later. So take down all clues: publisher, hometown, university affiliations, organizations s/he thanks, etc.

Explore the bibliography. Often you'll find books citing other books that cite other books that cite other books ... Check those other books' bibliographies and keep digging back to the primary sources, to where individual people are telling you, the reader, their stories directly, without having it filtered through all these various interpreters.

Inter-library loan is a gift from the gods.

3.) The Internet.

This a great starting place - but a terrible ending place. The Internet is rife with rumors, exaggerations, and falsehoods - and that's from the good-intentioned people. Beware of fool's gold.

Responsible journalists are taught to have at least two reliable sources before reporting something - that's a good goal for any research. The reliability of a web site depends entirely on its sources, and that's often difficult to assess. We've all seen sites that looked official but weren't, and truly official sites make mistakes.

However, make every use of the Internet's greatest strength: as a resource for finding the people who can give you the real gold.

As you work through written-word resources -- whether it's books, periodicals or the Internet -- search on two tracks: the actual information you're seeking and potential human sources. Note the names of people quoted or referenced in articles or books. Add affiliations (a

professor's university, an expert's company name, a spokesperson's governmental department, etc.) to your notes.

Asking the right person the right question is the most efficient gold-mining method ... the trick is finding the person.

4.) Associations.

There is an association for everything. Everything. Twice I've thought I'd made something up - once a profession, once an organization. Both times I found associations devoted to these things I thought I'd created. Both times the associations helped me contact people occupied with the same things my characters were, and both times the contacts gave me details and color I would not otherwise have had.

Two core publications found at most libraries are the Encyclopedia of Associations - a four-volume directory of national organizations and a three-volume directory of international organizations - and the National Trade and Professional Association Guide. Often local or regional directories are also available. These are great for searching out the names of relevant associations (some are obvious, some counterintuitive, and some downright bizarre) and contact information.

Many individual associations or trade publications then print directories to their members, also often available at libraries. For example, "Editor & Publisher" produces a listing for newspapers in the United States and Canada, divided between dailies and weeklies, then by state/province. It lists the contact information, plus names of top editors for each paper listed.

Increasingly, association information is available on the Web, too.

5.) Public affairs/information/media office.

Associations are the good news of gold-digging. Public affairs/information/media offices are often the bad news. Their titles sound as if they're sitting around waiting to help us. All too often, it's the opposite. These offices are my last resort.

And the bigger the organization the more this applies. I've had great success with public affairs folks putting me in touch with exactly the person I needed to talk to in Bedford County, Va., or Wyoming state government. But in AT&T or the Chicago District Attorney's office or - heaven help us poor diggers - the federal government? No way. Let's face it, these PA folks' job is to keep pesky diggers from bothering their honchos.

If it's not possible to work around them, my favorite opening comment is: "This might be your strangest question for the week." In fact I use that with all manner of cold-call contacts.

Many people will rise to the challenge of dealing with "strangeness" and will be helpful to an unknown voice on the phone claiming to be a novelist with a question. Often, the response is along the lines of, "You'd have to go a loooong way to have the strangest question this week." If they want to talk about the strangeness they've encountered, let them. It deepens the rapport, and you might find glittering nuggets among that strangeness. (Note: Get the name and direct phone number of each person you talk to along the way. Call them by name.)

6.) In any organization, start as high up as you can.

Avoid phone trees at all costs. (If a phone tree falls on a writer doing research, does anyone know? No! Because someone would have to pick up first and they never do.)

Say it's essential for your understanding of your heroine to talk to the person holding a particular Medium Honcho job in a large corporation.

First, try the easy route - see if there is a company roster on the Web.

If there is, do NOT directly call the person you want to talk to. Chances are that person has an assistant whose job is to block pesky diggers. Instead, go at least one, preferably two levels above that person. When you get Big Honcho's assistant (because you will get the assistant, not the BH), explain what info you're looking for. If BH's

assistant doesn't suggest the person you want (assistant is likely to try to fob you off to the public affairs office), suggest it yourself, "Would Medium Honcho also have that information?" All you need is a "yes" at this stage. (And if Big Honcho's assistant is no help, go higher up the corporate ladder.)

Now call the office of the Medium Honcho who was always your target, and say, "Big Honcho's office said you were the person who could most likely help me."

Aha! Medium Honcho's assistant now sees a way to make his boss look good with Big Honcho. Your odds of getting through to Medium Honcho just skyrocketed. (Send a followup note to Big Honcho saying how much you appreciated the wonderful help Medium Honcho provided. No need to be too specific. And CC the Medium Honcho.)

Okay, but what if there's no company roster? How do you find a honcho of any size?

If you have the name of the company/organization and an idea of a title, start searching the Internet with that combo. Try multiple searches with variants of titles. If you're coming up empty, try searching on what that title might accomplish or deal with - instead of "customer service" run a search with "complaints" or "consumers."

It's extremely helpful to throw in the area code of a potential phone number to limit your search.

Still no luck finding a phone number for the person you want? Don't give up.

Once, I had the name "Mrs. Johnson" and knew she worked for a local utility. That was it. I did multiple Google searches on the utility and area code. Kept coming up with the main number (phone tree alert!) So I added "association" to the search. Up popped a listing of officers in an organization that had nothing to do with what I was after. But ... ahhhh ... it listed office phone numbers, including one man who worked at the utility. Now, he had no connection to Mrs. Johnson, but I had a number for a real, live person whose job was not to stand between me and the gold.

I called and asked for Mrs. Johnson. Naturally, the man said I had the wrong number. "Oh," said I, "but this is the only number I have for Mrs. Johnson." And this very nice man looked in the company listings and gave me her direct number. (Note: Always get the phone number yourself, don't ever just let someone transfer you. You do not want to have to start over!)

Happy ending: Mrs. Johnson fixed a three-month nightmare problem in 36 hours.

7.) Zig-zag. Straight lines are often the fastest route to nowhere.

In a real-life emergency, I needed vital information buried in the bowels of bureaucracy. We're talking government, military and insurance - it doesn't come any more bureaucratic than that. Leads I'd hoped would be helpful revealed themselves as huge barbed wire fences encircling the gold. And time was essential.

I did a zig-zag.

From an Internet search on the name of the insurance organization and area code, I had a stack of tangential hits. I selected five and started calling. I struck out with two. On the third call, though, I reached a man whose duties at an area hospital included coordinating insurance. He had at his fingertips what I desperately needed. He asked if he could call me back. "No! This is an emergency." (If I'd been after research rather than a medical emergency, I would have said yes... after all, I had his number, and I could call him every day - and I would - until I got what I wanted.) He gave me the name and phone number of the Big Honcho. Big Honcho's assistant gave me the name and number of Medium Honcho.

You won't be surprised that I told Medium Honcho, "Big Honcho's office gave me your name and number as the person who will take care of this." Medium Honcho came through like a star.

8.) Think connections.

There are two kinds of connections: Yours and sources'.

Yours are the people you know. But don't stop there. Adding who the people you know know, increases connection opportunities exponentially.

Tell your contacts specifically what you need in a source. If you say "I want to interview a lawyer," you'll get loads of false leads. Tell people you're looking for a woman lawyer who's happily married, handles divorces, but only has men as clients. If you hit on this through a personal connection, you'll know it's really what you were looking for.

What about the sources' connections? If I were looking for a woman lawyer who's happily married, handles divorces, but only has men as clients, I would consider what connections such a woman might have. Sorting out for the "happily married" factor is both hardest and where imagination can fill in most readily, so leave that for last. Instead, I would look for articles on legal advice for men getting divorced and check for women lawyers quoted. At the same time I'd look for associations of divorce lawyers and associations of women lawyers. I'd search out men's support organizations, checking programs for men going through divorce.

I'd start calling each of these, and explain the kind of person I'm hoping to talk to for background. (Note: "Background" is a very soothing word to people you hope to interview. Especially with people in sensitive jobs such as lawyers, make it clear you're not asking for case studies or confidential information.) If any contact didn't have a lead for the specific source I'm after, I would ask for recommendations of male divorce lawyers who handle only male clients or of any women divorce lawyers who network extensively. Because those people could then have connections to someone who would be my perfect background source.

And I'd keep thinking of connections. Clerk of Court in divorce courts? Women's support organizations? Law school alum organizations? Bar associations? Ongoing legal education seminar teachers specializing in divorce?

9.) Work your way up to the best.

Build your reservoir of information and knock off the easy questions by first pursuing the experts on the experts. If you need to talk to diamond cutting experts, first approach people who write about diamond cutters. (Associations' staff members are great for this. And this is when you use the clues you noted to track down the author of a pertinent book.) Experts on the experts also offer the benefit of being accustomed to lay people.

Many technical experts are used to sharing their knowledge only with other experts in that field. This is where it pays to have built a background with those easier-to-interview sources. Consider beforehand ways to draw out information in a usable form -- ways more tactful than saying, "Could you say that in English?" I like a two-layer approach. First, I ask straightforward questions: "Could you still work with a pulled tendon in your thumb?" If those are not getting me what I need, I give the interviewee a brief idea of my specific scenario and ask if that will work. Only once has an interviewee said simply, "No." You can guess the follow-up question: Why not? And that got him started.

Don't be satisfied with a simple "Yes," either. Keep digging: Can you think of a better way for that to happen? Is that how you would approach that situation? What things could go wrong in that scenario? If you were in that scenario what would you be thinking about?

10.) Refuse to be caught in dead ends.

First, have more than one line of inquiry going. This is essential.

When you talk to association staffers, don't ask for one contact, ask for three or more. Think of it as sending out scouts to find your gold mine. You aren't going to send just one - what if he falls in a ditch and doesn't return? You send a platoon, a regiment. And send them by various routes.

For example, I wanted information on tornadoes in Wisconsin. I'd found Internet references to two major tornadoes in the month and area I needed. I wanted details. I checked the local papers of the

towns, called the closest university and asked who specialized in local history, called the historical societies in both towns, called the fire departments of both towns (non-emergency number!) That totals seven paths of inquiry. Three got me nowhere. Each of the rest gave me a little something, and two sources recommended I talk to the same person. She was my gold mine.

The next way to avoid dead ends is by asking every source you encounter who else they think might be able to help you. Some will have no idea. But many will open an entirely new path for you. Asking that question was what got me my tornado gold mine lady.

You're bound to hit useless leads and dud sources, but it doesn't matter as long as you have more paths to follow. When you stop digging it shouldn't be because you've run out of places to try, but because you have all the gold you can hold.

So get out there and dig. Apply your creativity to figuring out how to reach that nugget you're after. And when you find it, revel in your Eureka!

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(SIDEBAR/INFO BOX #1)

Pointers on interviewing:

- Most people like to answer questions about what they do/know.
- Always ask to set up a time convenient to the interviewee, but be prepared for them to say "right now."
- Arrange it so you call or go to them. It's easier on the interviewee and gives you more control (you won't forget to call, they might.) And you can pick up details by being in his/her environment for an in-person interview.
- If you reach someone who's one step away from the ideal source, don't expect that intermediary to give you the source's contact information. Instead, ask the intermediary to ask the source if a.) s/he would be willing to talk and b.) if s/he would be comfortable with the intermediary giving you the contact information or would rather contact you. Set a time to call the intermediary to find out the answer.
- Have a few questions prepared, but also let the source's answers lead you to more questions. Following their train of thought will give you added insights.
- Have backup questions in mind to get specific information you need if your first question doesn't do the trick.
- Remember the mantra: who, what, when, where, how and why.
- Whenever possible, ask open-ended questions (how, what and why, are especially good; they call on the answerer to expand.)

(SIDEBAR/INFO BOX #2)

Tried and true questions

- What do books/movies/stereotypes get wrong about your area of expertise?

-- What can you tell me about your area of expertise that most people don't know or would be surprised at?

-- What would you miss most about your area of expertise if you left it? What would you miss least?

-- Is there anything I haven't asked you that I should have?

-- Can I call you back if I think of any further questions?

And a statement that's reaped many a nugget:

-- If you think of anything else, I'd love to hear about it. (Give them ways to contact you.)