

The Listening Post Assignment

- Description:** A listening post is a reporting tool too rarely employed by most journalists who are comfortable with a handful of sources whose phone numbers they have memorized. The government reporter who only ever hangs out at City Hall misses a lot of stories. Your goal is to learn to get beyond those usual suspects and find the untold stories that deeply affect people's lives.
- Benefit:** This exercise will help you learn to build inroads with people and groups that don't often have their voices represented in the newspaper.
- Assignment:** Select a location in your assigned neighborhood where people gather to relax, socialize, get a haircut, drink a cup of tea, etc. The keyword here is LISTEN. You are there to build relationships with people you wouldn't otherwise encounter in the course of your daily life or your work as a journalist. You will learn their concerns and about the issues that most affect them in their neighborhoods.
- Procedure:** There's a real benefit to picking a place that feels a little uncomfortable to you. When you go to that place, you can break the ice by telling people that you are a journalism student who is trying to learn more about your community so you can be a better reporter. It's the truth and it will help people open up if you emphasize that you want to learn from them.
- Some of you might want to go in with a topic in mind to talk about. Others might want to keep the notebook in your backpack rather than bringing it out. Part of the learning component of this assignment is learning how to read such situations.
- Eavesdropping does not count as a Listening Post.
- Requirements:** Visit your listening post at least three times during the quarter. Try going at different times to see who you meet. If your location just isn't working out, try another one. Don't come back empty handed. Keep trying a location until you fulfill the goal of each Listening Post.
- File a two-page, typed, double-spaced beat memo each time you visit. This should be in a narrative format and use first person. It's not a news article. It should include:
- Where you went and why you picked that location
 - What day and what time of day you went
 - Who was there? Who did you talk to? Who did you not talk to and why?

- Where possible, provide a list of source names of people you talked to and their phone numbers.
- What did you learn? What frustrations did you hear voiced?
- What challenged you personally?
- **At least three story ideas you came away with. Write one or two sentences that describe your story idea with some specificity.** A story idea requires a little research. I don't want "He told me this and I want to check it out." Check it out before turning in your LP. Do enough reporting to know if there is a story there.

Evaluation:

You are graded primarily on the quality of the story ideas you come up with. These should yield something good enough that one of them could be an idea for your final story. You are also graded on your ability to learn what is on people's minds. Not everyone will be open to you, but you must persevere until you find folks who are. That may mean trying several locations or trying a local at different times of day. If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.