



Who Let the Watchdogs Out? A Citizens Guide to Taking Back America

www.WatchdogWire.com

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Franklin Center strives to “promote the education of the public about waste, corruption, incompetence, fraud and taxpayer abuse by public officials at all levels of government.”

About the Franklin Center

www.FranklinCenter.org

“The Salvation of the State is watchfulness in the citizen.”
–Inscription on the Nebraska State Capitol

Working against a growing tide of cutbacks in news media, the Franklin Center is committed to filling the void of information about state and municipal government. With transparency, accountability and fiscal responsibility as its watchwords, the Franklin Center identifies, trains, and supports investigative journalists working to detect and expose corruption and incompetence in government at the state and local levels.

The Franklin Center believes that government transparency and accountability is not a conservative or liberal idea – it is an *American* idea. A free flow of information is essential to maintaining our free republic and the first step in holding government officials accountable to the people. For the problem we face today is not only the rampant waste, fraud and abuse that exists in government, but the lack of reporting to expose it. Franklin Center works with citizen journalists to bridge that gap.

The Rise of Citizen Journalism

Americans are fed up – and have taken matters, literally, into their own hands. There is a growing trend of concerned citizens becoming “man on the street” investigative journalists, breaking stories previously left untouched by the mainstream media, and capturing wildly inappropriate statements on video from organizations long thought to be immune from the media’s scrutiny.

The mainstream media is no longer the only outlet for news. The power of the Internet allows tweets, blog posts, and videos to reach an audience across the globe within seconds. Organizations and politicians alike are now under the watchful eye of the American people. These efforts have been instrumental in providing independent, reliable and sometimes shocking information to the public.

Why Be a Citizen Watchdog

There are too many talking heads on cable news networks who talk *at* the American people, and sometimes even talk *down* to us. People are tired of being told what to do and how to think. They are tired of politicians who pay lip service when it is convenient and then betray their constituents the moment a tough vote comes to the floor.

In this 24-hour news cycle where so-called opinion leaders are fighting to be the story of the hour, average citizens find themselves struggling to make sense of it all. How can you say you are committed to cutting spending when you just approved a bigger budget? How can you say you care about creating jobs when you are punishing small businesses with increased regulations? How can you say you care about improving education when you let the teachers’ unions drive all the decisions?

It just doesn't add up. And reporters are contributing to the noise.

What the American people need are facts, not more opinions. Editorials and opinion pieces only get you so far. Sure, they appeal to people who already agree with you. But if you really want to change minds, open people's eyes and more importantly, get them to ask questions. You will *report* the news, not comment on it. That's what being a citizen watchdog is all about – finding inconsistencies and half-truths and exposing them for the lies they are.

By reporting the news, you can empower others with knowledge and information. You plant a seed that will take on a life of its own even after people finish reading your article or watching your video news report. Your story is no longer just an idea on paper, but a call to action. And that's the goal of citizen journalism – to inspire everyday people to become active and engaged citizens.

Your news stories, if researched and reported properly, *can* make a difference. There is a story lurking around every corner of the state capitol. In your local government, someone is getting paid for a job he doesn't do. Someone is spending tax dollars without approval. Someone is rewarding a special interest group for its support during campaign season.

This training manual is designed to teach you to think like an investigative reporter, identify potential leads, and give you the tools to successfully report and promote your findings. If municipal, state and federal officials are making backdoor deals in the middle of the night, your watchdog skills will be there to bring them to light.

Getting Started: Six Steps to Becoming an Information Activist

1. Develop A Personal Brand
2. Become an Expert on Policy Issues
3. Learn Your Local and State Government
4. Commit To Accuracy
5. Earn Credibility and Authority
6. Start Writing and Reporting

Develop a Brand

Before you begin writing or purchasing website domain names, spend some time reflecting on your personal brand. Sometimes it is better to cover one or just a few issues to help focus your thoughts and efforts.

Some of you will already know what your niche is because you have spent years preaching to your friends and colleagues about that one hot-button issue that gets you talking for hours. But if you need a little guidance, start by answering these questions:

What gets your blood boiling? What issues ignite frustration or passion in you?
Is there a common theme in articles you read or re-post on Facebook and Twitter?
Where do you want to see the most improvement in your community?
Have you volunteered for an issue-based campaign?
Have you written to your congressman, state representative or municipal leaders? Attended a town hall meeting or rally? If so, what was the issue?

Next, draft a mission statement or tagline that sums up what you are all about. For example, if reducing government waste and examining line-item budgets is your niche, your tagline could be “Making every tax dollar count,” or “Keeping Ohio On a Budget.”

Radio hosts are really good at coming up with these one-liners that help listeners quickly identify the host’s values. Similarly, bloggers sometimes choose a theme quote that summarizes their philosophy or mission. The important thing is that you pick something your readers can identify with you and your cause.

Become an Expert on the Issues

Next, you will need to become an expert. Great authors and journalists will often tell you to write about what you know. If you have a connection to a local issue, you will have an easier time relating to your audience. You can better answer the reader’s question, “Why should I care about this issue?” because you already do care.

Start by reading local blogs and news sites to stay informed on important issues affecting local citizens. Next, find a policy institute in your state that outlines key legislative issues. *The State Policy Network* (SPN) is a good resource: <http://www.spn.org/>

If you are researching a specific policy issue, there are several national think tanks that provide annual statistics and in-depth white papers. *The Heritage Foundation* is a good resource: <http://www.heritage.org/>

A few helpful online resources:

SUNSHINE REVIEW

Bringing state & local government to light.

Sunshine Review (<http://sunshinereview.org/>)

You can find information on your state budget, government salaries, House Expenditure Reports, etc



State Budget Solutions <http://www.statebudgetsolutions.org/>

A guide to state financial operations

BALLOTPEDIA

*an interactive almanac of state politics

Ballotpedia (<http://ballotpedia.org/>)

An online encyclopedia of state politics, which includes information on elections, state legislature, and ballot measures

SPN STATE POLICY NETWORK

State Policy Network (www.spn.org)

A network of free market think tanks across the country that are focused on state policy issues

Learn Your State and Local Government

Don't spend your time covering what is happening in Washington, DC, if you live in Texarkana unless it has a direct impact on your community or state. There are hundreds of national capitol reporters waiting to scoop you on the latest federal legislation or the president's new job proposal. But good state and local reporters in your community are lacking due to significant cuts in the journalism industry. This provides you with a unique opportunity to make a real difference being a watchdog right where you are.

So start by becoming an expert on your community. Sure you may know a little bit about everything. But what would you want someone to know if a new family moved to your neighborhood? Answer the following questions to get your thoughts flowing:

- How is the school system? How do students' test scores compare with the national average? What is the true cost per student?
- How are the property taxes compared to neighboring communities? Have they gone up or down recently?
- Are there any recurring special elections? How often do they take place?
- Are there any controversial local ordinances?
- How does the local law enforcement operate?
- Are there strict curfew laws for minors?
- Is your community a safe haven for convicted sex offenders?
- How well are public resources like parks and libraries taken care of?
- What costs are hidden and deferred in the annual budget?

Commit To Accuracy

You don't become an expert by writing a news article. You become an expert by doing research and being right; by doing your homework. By raising valid points that no one else is covering in the news. By listening to what people are talking about and finding out what is important to members of your community. Over time, you earn respect and authority by consistently producing quality work.

The profession of journalism is based on a relentless pursuit of the facts. If one of your sources makes an accusation, it is your job to call the accused and get his side of the story. If someone references a statistic or percentage in an interview, it is your responsibility to confirm that figure before publishing it.

Newspapers and publications also earn a trust with the American people by being right. They double and triple check their words to ensure they say what they mean. They do not flippantly post a story just to scoop another publication. And in the rare occasion when a reporter does get something wrong, he or she has the integrity to print a correction.

The Franklin Center for Government & Public Integrity is guided by the Code of Ethics outlined by the Society of Professional Journalists. Our obligation is to that code and most importantly, the public, which relies upon us and every journalist across the nation to provide comprehensive information so they can make an educated decision or form an honest opinion.

Earn Credibility and Authority

Credibility is more easily lost than gained. The Associated Press, for example, hires hundreds of copy editors and fact checkers to protect its reputation as a champion of objectivism and accuracy. The President of the United States has a full press staff to ensure background knowledge and talking points on any topic are carefully crafted to be defensible.

We live in a culture of “gotch-yas.” Opponents gravitate to your mistakes, no matter how small, and actively seek them out to discredit you. There is an even higher level of scrutiny in the online world where photos, tweets and status updates can be misinterpreted or taken out of context. This doesn’t mean you should censor your thoughts or water down your message. But you should carefully consider everything you post.

Don’t give these naysayers an excuse to discount your work. Fifteen extra minutes of copyediting and proofreading can save you a major headache down the road. Thirty minutes of research before walking into a public meeting will arm you with information that will give you credibility. If you are making an impact, you will always be criticized. But don’t let it be about the quality of your work.

Start Writing and Reporting: Get Connected on Watchdog Wire. www.WatchdogWire.com

Now that you know how to get started, put your skills into action on Watchdog Wire—an online news network where citizen watchdogs like you can connect with other like minded people. We encourage watchdogs to post original content and cover local issues like school board meetings, town hall meetings, public spending, or even local regulations.

If you are uncomfortable or unsure about writing a story, you can also report local news tips on watchdog Wire and we will assign someone to follow up. We also have a great team who can help promote your content and sharpen your writing skills. Don't hesitate to e-mail us at Info@WatchDogWire.com.

Sign up on www.WatchdogWire.com today and start holding your elected officials accountable.

News Writing

Everyone has a different style of writing. But with news reporting, there is a basic structure that most journalists follow.

Inverted pyramid style- Shaped like an upside down pyramid, the inverted pyramid serves as a visual example of how to organize written information in an article or essay. The broad base represents the most newsworthy information first. The narrow tip represents the least newsworthy information. The lede paragraph should only include the main idea and the remaining details are added as the story progresses in the article. If structured properly, the meat and potatoes of the article will be addressed early and the rest is just fixings to add extra flavor. This is why when editors cut stories, they typically cut from the bottom. Another reason for the inverted pyramid is that readers' attention spans are short. They want you to get to the point – in the headline and in the first paragraph

Lede (or lead)- This is the first sentence or paragraph of your article. Think of the *lede* as your first impression; you only get one. Make it short and snappy – one to two sentences. Get straight to your main point. You can be creative when appropriate – perhaps on a longer feature piece. But for your basic news stories, get to the point.

The 5 Ws

The who, what, where, when, why (and how) make up the basic elements of a news story. Make sure you think about each one as you develop your story.

- *Who*- Introduces the characters. Who is directly involved? What are their professional and personal affiliations? Who is affected? Can we relate to them? Do we sympathize with them? Are they being rewarded or punished for their actions?
- *What*- Provides key details to connect pieces of the story together. The first question the reader asks after reading the headline is “What happened”? Make sure your story answers that question in the first paragraph, and tells readers what it means to them.
- *When*- Timing is important. Did the incident happen the night before an election or an important vote? On the day of an important anniversary? During tax season?
- *Where*- Only emphasize the *where* if it is relevant to the story. Did the rally take place in front of the local court house? Did a teacher/student scandal happen on school property? Sometimes a private versus public setting can be important to the story. Don't forget that sometimes the where is better explained visually – with a photo or map

- *Why*- The *why* makes your story come alive – it goes beyond the facts and gets readers to think about the bigger picture. Why is this policy necessary? Why does this cost so much? Who should be responsible? The *why* will get your readers to talk about this issue with their friends and neighbors
- *How*- The *how* often makes a good side bar or bullet since it can involve a more complex explanation of a procedure, ruling, or historical background

Basic Writing Guidelines

- *Always use original sources* – Do not trust what others have published. If others tell you something, ask how they know. Were they there? Did they see it or hear it themselves? The journalism rule is: If your mother says she loves you, check it out.
- *Write tight*- Keep sentences and paragraphs short. If you can say the same thing in fewer words, do it. Use clear language, action verbs (no passive voice), and get to the point quickly
- *Write how you speak*- Use everyday language and avoid philosophical rants. If it sounds like an essay, it probably needs to be rewritten
- *Write for your audience*- Make it relevant. Why does your reader care? This is citizen journalism so write for the citizen. It is good to include facts and figures, but be sure to give them meaning and context
- *Find your focus*- Can you sum up your story in one sentence? Use the lede as a guide. If you start to get

off track, ask yourself if those details support the main idea of the story

- *Create an outline-* What do you predict the elements of the story will be? Write them down and continually make updates throughout the reporting process. This also helps you organize information, which can be the most difficult part of writing
- *Write your first draft without notes*, then go back and fill in the gaps with facts, numbers, and quotes
- *Assume your reader is intelligent but under-informed*
- *Provide links to public records, documents and databases*

Packaging

While writing is the general make-up of a news article, don't forget that story telling methods can go beyond words. With so much competition in the media, you need to make your content engaging and interactive for your reader. Experiment with the following packaging techniques that allow for multiple points of entry in your story: hyperlinks, subheadings, sidebars, info-graphics, charts, photos, timelines, pull quotes, bullets, and question and answer segments.

No matter how you display your information, be sure to back up your data by linking to government agencies and public records. This is an invitation for your readers to continue their own research. They don't have to take your word for it when they can click a link and read the facts directly from the source itself.

Public Meetings

Attending public meetings is a crucial part of being a citizen watchdog. Decisions that affect your local community are made at these regularly scheduled and special meetings. The law requires that meeting details be posted for the public to see, but seldom of these meetings are actually covered by the news media.

- Meeting agendas and minutes are often posted online. If not, call ahead and ask for them. You should have these in-hand for each meeting
- Show up early. These meetings are designed primarily for the conduct of government, not to accommodate inquiring citizens, so expect a few strange looks
- Keep a low profile. Once the members of the meeting know you are in attendance and taking notes, their behavior can change significantly
- Bring a flipcam/ audio or video recorder. If you are at an open meeting, there should be no problem with documenting the event, however government bodies do get to set the rules for their meetings as long as they are within state law.
- Ask yourself these questions: How is the local paper covering these meetings? Is there an hierarchy of roles? What title does each member hold? Do members have additional jobs or affiliations around town that may conflict with these titles? What is their specific job responsibility? Are they elected or appointed? Do they have term limits? If so, how long?

Open Records and Meeting Laws:

Open Meeting Law, which differs by state, imposes legal requirements for public meetings. Generally in all states, the purpose of the law is to guarantee transparent conduct of government for the benefit of the people. Remember, everything government does and has is public. Nothing about government is private. The only question is what is open or closed. And those who govern us must prove closure serves the greater public good.

You can find every state's open records and open meetings laws in the Open Government Guide:

<http://www.rcfp.org/ogg/index.php>

Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)

Information sourced from www.foia.gov

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) is a law that gives you- the citizen- the right to access information from the federal government. This is your constitutional right as a citizen, and a valuable resource to you as a citizen watchdog. Navigating the system can be tricky, but if you are persistent, you can access information that provides great insight into the workings of the federal government.

To write and file a request, use the FOIA generator on the Reporter's Committee For Freedom of the Press website: <http://www.rcfp.org/foialetter/index.php>

Sourcing

Sourcing is the most important part of any news story. Always identify sources by name except under extraordinary circumstances. Your credibility is on the line. The voices that tell the story need to be varied and diverse; aim for three different sources per story. Source lists can become irrelevant or stale when reporters resort to the same sources with whom they are comfortable or are easy to contact for a quick comment.

Always make extra efforts to get all sides of the story, and briefly report those efforts when someone cannot be reached or refuses to comment.

You need to be willing and able to scrutinize your sources. As you establish a professional relationship with them, you must remember that these sources have agendas beyond sharing information and providing quotes. This insight will help you determine whether or not the source is credible and identify other sources you will need to contact for an opposing or supportive perspective on a given issue. Sometimes reporters become too trusting of their sources and are manipulated into reporting an issue that serves the sources' purposes rather than the needs of their readers. Don't let that happen to you. Stay alert and try to be one step ahead of your source.

Steps to a Successful Interview

1. *Get the Interview:* Call the source directly or at his/her office to schedule an interview. Identify yourself and the purpose of the meeting. You may have to go through an administrative assistant. Have a date, time, and location in mind. When explaining the purpose, be vague. For example, if you want to drill your mayor or city councilman about specific line items on the city budget that waste taxpayer money, say you want to talk about the mayor's proposed budget and how it will affect residents in the city. The latter description is less hostile and gives the mayor or councilman an opportunity to talk about the impact of budgeting tax dollars on citizens
2. *Prepare:* Preparation is key. Research your source. Google his or her name. Ask competitors and allies what they know about your source. What is the appropriate title to address him or her? Walk through the story in your mind and prepare about 15 interview questions
3. *Control Your Emotions:* Leave your ego at the door. Don't show emotion. Don't fight with the source. You are not there to change his or her mind, you are there to report – and sometimes challenge – his or her point of view
4. *Breaking the Ice:* Getting started is the hardest part when tensions are high and the source doesn't know what to expect from you. A friendly opener helps your source relax and put his or her guard down. Look around the office. Is there evidence of a favorite sports team, alma mater, or hometown? Are there interesting photos, paintings, or awards that could be good conversation starters?

5. *Save tough questions for the end:* This ensures the interview doesn't end before it begins. If your source is offended or unpleasantly surprised by your first question, he or she can easily walk away and refuse to finish the interview.
6. *Don't interrupt your source:* Let your source talk. Often you can get more information from a source if you are quiet. Let the source fill awkward silences. Don't feel compelled to affirm his or her statements or comment on them. The source may look for your affirmation with phrases like, "You know what I mean?" or "Does that make sense?" Be careful not to agree but only to acknowledge that you understand
7. *Take notes but tape record only if necessary:* Inform the source you will be recording, and tell him or her why. You record in order to quote them properly and ensure accuracy. There is nothing scandalous about that.
8. *Ask follow-up questions* after they respond; make it conversational. Don't just stick to the script. You want to appear informed and engaged
9. *Ask open-ended questions*, not questions that can be answered with a yes or no response
10. *Check the facts:* Just because your source has an important title behind a name does not mean he or she is always right. In fact, sometimes prominent people hide behind their titles. Double check anything the source states as fact. If he quotes a statistic, confirm it. If your source claims something is or is not in a piece of legislation, read the whole bill to verify. Don't be afraid to ask the source if you missed anything or if he/she has something to add. This makes the source feel like the expert and sometimes inspires him or her to make one final point

Getting Sources to Talk

First you must understand that your source has no legal obligation to talk to you or any reporter. So you must be smart about how you approach them.

If a source is hesitant to talk...

- Tell him or her that the interview is no big deal. Tell the source that you are interviewing many people, but that he or she has important insight (or a unique perspective) that you would like to include in the story. This argument puts more focus on the big picture and relieves pressure the source may be feeling about being singled out
- Ask for referrals or alternative sources. People who run in the same professional and social circles often share the same information. Also ask if there is someone else at the organization who would be willing to speak on the record

If you get a “No comment”...

- Rephrase the question. Don't give up immediately, just ask it in a different way
- You still have the right to print “No comment”. Remind the source politely that you will quote him or her on that
- Say “You've already told me this much, you should tell me the rest so I have the correct context”

Make a conjecture to provoke a comment...

- Use what you think you know. Make a statement and your source will either comment on it, confirming your suspicions, or correct you
- This tactic is NOT justification to lie, or misrepresent yourself

Act ignorant...

- Play dumb. Ask the source to walk you through an approval process or procedure even if you already know how the system works. If the source's explanation does not line up with company policy, you have the beginning of a story
- It doesn't hurt to say you need the source's help or to ask where a particular rule or tradition comes from
- Say "I'm not an expert on this stuff. Can you explain it to me so my readers can understand too?"

If they reveal something important...

- Ask them how they know, seek credibility from your source, and double check what he or she says. Is it firsthand information? Was the source present to witness or confirm?

Request an e-mail interview...

- If you cannot get a phone or in-person interview, request an e-mail interview. This should be used as a last resort to get an "on the record" statement for your story. You might not build a relationship with the source via e-mail, but his or her perspective in the story adds to the continuing relationship with your reader. The source's comment, even if written, gives you more credibility as a reporter

On and Off the Record

- On the Record: You can print anything the source says
- Off the Record: You cannot print anything the source says is off the record. But you must agree to those terms prior to the interview.
- On Background: When a source shares background information on a story to provide you with context or a more complete perspective. On background, you can print the information (after you double check its factuality), but you cannot attribute it to the source

If the source agrees in advance to talk on the record, you are in control of what you print. You don't need the source's permission. However, if your source decides to share information OFF the record, it should never be published. Do not divulge the identity of a source who speaks off the record; you may destroy that source's confidence in coming to you with information in the future and possibly prevent other sources from coming forward with OFF the record information.

You can, however, investigate further the content discussed OFF the record and publish it using other sources. You just can't reveal where it originally came from. Whatever was discussed OFF the record may be confirmed by another source or document.

If forced by extraordinary circumstances to publish information from a source who requires anonymity, always tell readers why, corroborate the information and be prepared to keep that source's identity secret no matter what.

Your Right to Take Photographs/Videos

Be sure you know your photography rights as a citizen and don't be bullied by officers who don't want to be caught on camera. Below are a few points outlined by the [American Civil Liberties Union](#) (ACLU) website:

- It is your constitutional right to photograph anything that is plainly visible from a public space. This includes federal buildings, transportation facilities, and police and other government officials carrying out their duties. This is good news for the citizen watchdog and is also important in a free society
- When you are on private property, the property owner sets the rules about taking pictures. If you disobey the property owner's rules, they can remove you from their property and possibly even charge you with trespassing
- Police officers may not generally confiscate or demand to view your photographs or video without a warrant. The courts may approve the seizure of a camera in some circumstances if police have a reasonable, good-faith belief that it contains evidence of a crime. But they would still need approval before they could legally take your camera. So ask to see a warrant or court order before handing over your camera
- Police may not delete your photographs or video under any circumstances. Even if you are arrested, deleting photos would be tampering with evidence

- Police officers may legitimately order citizens to cease activities that are truly interfering with legitimate law enforcement operations. So don't get in their way while you are taking photographs
- The right to photograph does not give you a right to break any other laws. For example, if you are trespassing to take photographs, you may still be charged with trespass

If you are stopped or detained for taking photographs:

- Always remain polite and never physically resist a police officer
- If stopped for photography, the right question to ask is, "Am I free to go?" If the officer says no, then you are being detained, something that under the law an officer cannot do without reasonable suspicion that you have or are about to commit a crime or are in the process of doing so. Until you ask to leave, your being stopped is considered voluntary under the law and is legal
- If you are detained, politely ask what crime you are suspected of committing, and remind the officer that taking photographs is your right under the First Amendment and does not constitute reasonable suspicion of criminal activity
- Always remember that no matter what the law says, at that moment the police officer has total power over you

Resources for the Investigative Reporter

The Associated Press Stylebook

<http://www.apstylebook.com/>

The Reporter's Desktop

www.Reporter.org/desktop

Legal Guide for Bloggers (Electronic Frontier Foundation)

<https://www.eff.org/issues/bloggers/legal/join>

Reporter's Committee for Freedom of the Press

www.rcfp.org

- Open Government Guide: You can find every state's open records and open meetings laws
<http://www.rcfp.org/ogg/index.php>
- FOIA generator: Instructions on how to write and file a Freedom of Information request
<http://www.rcfp.org/foialetter/index.php>

Investigative Reporters and Editors (www.ire.org)

A grassroots organization dedicated to improving the quality of investigative reporting

Accurint- (www.acurint.com)

A locate and research tool essential for background checks. A small fee may be associated for in-depth searches

Guidestar (www.Guidestar.org)

A collection of non-profit related information ranging from the salaries of public figures to political contributions

Watchdog Wire (www.WatchdogWire.com)

Post your stories on this online news network and report local news tips. More information on page 12.

Open Secrets (www.OpenSecrets.org)

The Center for Responsive Politics' guide to money in U.S. elections is the primary place to track campaign contributions

Sunshine Review (<http://sunshinereview.org/>)

You can find information on your state budget, government salaries, House Expenditure Reports, etc

State Budget Solutions <http://www.statebudgetsolutions.org/>

A guide to state financial operations

Follow the Money (www.followthemoney.org)

You can find information on political donations in all 50 states

Muckety (<http://news.muckety.com/>)

An online tool that uses mapping technology to show the relationship between people and organizations, revealing who has the real power and influence

Recovery.gov (www.Recovery.gov)

An online resource that tracks the spending distribution from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act

Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER)

www.pacer.gov

*These links and many others are available at www.WatchdogWire.com under the “Resources” tab.



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