

Becoming a City Storyteller

So you want to be a City Storyteller? Step off the sidelines and get in the game!



RESEARCH

- STEP 1: Know Your Beat**
- STEP 2: Understanding Solutions Journalism**
- STEP 3: Know Your Rights**
- STEP 4: Be a Responsible Citizen Journalist**
- STEP 5: Start Writing**
- STEP 6: Get Published**
- STEP 7: Stick with it**
- STEP 8: Get Social**

STEP 1: PICK YOUR BEAT

[City Storytellers](#) tell the stories of their communities by writing about how Civic Trustees and emerging leaders are using evidence-based solutions to get results. City Storytelling is about creating or writing the news, and helping get the word out on issues that are important to the community.

Over the past few years, there has been a stark decline in newspaper advertising revenues, causing major budget losses and ultimately staff layoffs in New Jersey's largest daily newspapers.



INTERVIEW STAKEHOLDERS

Rather than relying on campaign literature or word of mouth, City Storytellers have the power to fill the information gap in a responsible non-partisan way, to prevent vital news from slipping through the cracks.

City Storytellers write about men and women leading civic innovation in their cities. In the cities that have Civic Trusts this is Civic Trustees (as well as emerging citizen leaders) that focus on finding solutions to the challenges their cities face.



REPORT ONLINE

Civic Trustees are a new force for strengthening our cities' ability to tackle tough issues. They are committed to identifying evidence-based solutions to their city's problems, and working together to implement them with a "no-blame" approach. They make a pledge

Becoming a City Storyteller

to serve their city, with their fellow Trustees, by working together to make their city stronger than it is today. Supported by The Citizens Campaign's platform of civic power tools and training, and its pro bono government attorneys and policy experts in urban government.

Emerging Citizen Leaders are men and women who are a force for good in their communities. Responding to their cities challenges by starting conversations, taking action and collaborating across sectors.

STEP 2: Understanding Solutions Journalism

Solutions journalism focuses the reader on solutions by writing with hope. This type of journalism shows that regular citizens are smart enough to take on complex issues in their communities. We all know that the traditional way of reporting is not the only way of writing. It is important as City Storytellers, you contribute to this emerging form of journalism. By writing about evidence-based solutions and making the 'victims' protagonists, you can start to change the conversation around the issues in your city. Some tips to keep in mind:

1. When writing about a specific issue or event, write about how the impacted people are responding and any alternatives they may be seeking. **This will enable you to explain evidence-based models that can be replicated.**
2. Give people a 'handle' on the news by informing them where they can learn more and **how they can get involved.**
3. Write the story so that it could be told five days later. Be future minded.

With solutions journalism, you can help people to understand their legal and political rights. Additionally, by reporting on the community of civic innovators in your city, you tell the stories of the pragmatic ways citizen leaders are solving challenges to benefit their community as a whole.

STEP 3: Know Your Rights

Open Public Records Act (N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1 et seq.) OPRA gives citizen journalists access to the same government information available to elected officials, information that is often essential to making an intelligent proposal.

- Access to government resolutions, ordinances, meeting minutes, contracts, budgets, and expenditures
- Guarantees a response in 7 days
- Copies of public records limited to 5 cents a copy (or 7 cents for legal size paper)
- Download the [Citizens Guide to OPRA](#) from the Government Records Council

The Sunshine Law or Open Public Meetings Act (N.J.S.A. 10: 4-6) The Sunshine Law guarantees the public's right to observe government in action and the right for citizen participation

- The right to speak at public meetings

- Requirement for official government action to occur in public
- The public must be given notice of meetings
- Limits the ability of governing bodies to go into "executive sessions"

The Right to Videotape Meetings (Tarus vs. Pine Hill) A 2007 New Jersey Supreme Court ruling upheld the public's common law right to videotape meetings. While citizens have the right to videotape meetings, the governing body is allowed to adopt rules to prevent disruptions, like limiting camera placement. Before attending a meeting to videotape, call the clerk to find out what rules, if any, there are.

Party Democracy Act (P.L. 2009, c. 135) Adopted in 2009, the Party Democracy Act was designed to make the political parties fairer, transparent, and accessible. It guarantees access to a list of official members of the municipal and county committees, including both appointed and elected members. It also requires each county board of elections to post copies of the County Political Party's Constitution and Bylaws.

Citizen Service Act (P.L. 2009, c. 141) This law requires municipalities to maintain a public directory of boards and commissions, including terms of office, the authorizing statute or ordinance, and vacancies to be filled. As a citizen journalist this can come in very handy to see who sits on powerful boards, and to compare who applied vs. who was appointed.

STEP 4: Be a Responsible Citizen Journalist

Be Accurate. Use a note pad, tape recorder, or even video camera to take notes or record interviews. Obtain public records using OPRA to back up your story. **Always re-read your article to double check numbers and important facts.**

Be Thorough. Interview all the community stakeholders impacted by the ordinance or development to get the full story. This includes the Mayor & Council, Business Owners, Community Non-Profits, and concerned citizens.

Be Fair. It's important not to show favoritism towards one side or another. At the same time, if someone is opposed to a certain proposal ask them: *what is their solution to the problem?* This is very important, if someone is going to discredit a proposal, ask them to offer up a constructive alternative.

Be Independent. Leave your partisanship at the door. This will help you build a larger audience and be seen as a credible news source.

Be Objective. If you want to be read as a non-partisan, trusted news source, then you need to refrain from inserting your own opinion. To do this, **we recommend you always use a "No Blame Approach."** This means not resorting to the blame game, but instead focusing on constructive solutions. And, if you want to earn readers' trust, you need to remain objective and respectful.

STEP 5: Start Writing

REMEMBER: Every story should cover the five W's:



Before publishing an article or blog post, re-read your piece to make sure each of these questions are answered.

Lead with your most important information. Think big numbers and the big picture. Pick your juiciest piece of news and lead with it.

Your story can be a 500 or 1,000 words. On the internet there are no word limits, but presently, **67% of news is read on mobile.** If you can edit your article down for this, it may better serve your audience.

Write like you would want to read it in print. These days it is not uncommon for traditional print publications to run an online piece, so it is important to be aware that whatever you write might show up in other places.

Be Timely. It's important to report the news within a day or two, even when you don't have as much information as you'd like, especially when proposals are advancing through local government. If you are publishing online, you can always post updates. Even established media outlets like the Associated Press will continually update a story as more information is obtained.

STEP 6: Get Published

Look for online news sites in your area. These are exclusively-online news sites that serve a specific municipality or region, and many welcome citizen generated content. The Citizens Campaign is connected to various hyper locals around the state.

Start a blog. Websites like Blogger (blogger.com) and WordPress (wordpress.com) make this very easy and free and allows you to have total control of the content and timing.

Start a website. If you have a lot of varying content to share, like posting public records, or you want to have many people contributing to the same site, setting up a WordPress site might be the solution. WordPress would be ideal for community organizations or initiatives that want to work on a common purpose -- it could be general town news, a green initiative, or even a business directory to promote economic development. Download our [Citizens Guide to the Media](#) for helpful hints on starting a blog or a WordPress site.

**Hyper locals in
The Citizens Campaign's Network:**
Andaiye Taylor- [Brick City Live](#)
Joe Malinconico- [Paterson Press](#)
John Heinis- [Hudson County View](#)
Krystal Knapp- [Planet Trenton](#)
**Thomas Peterson- [Planet Trenton](#)
& [Peterson's Breaking News of Trenton](#)**
Daniel Levin- [Jersey City Independent](#)

STEP 7: Stick With It!

The hardest part about being a City Storyteller is staying with it, which makes it all the more important that you are covering something you are passionate or knowledgeable about. Remember, you don't have to be researching and writing every day to help keep your community informed. Whatever time you have to devote to reporting will be appreciated by your readers.



Check the reminders on your calendar. A City Storyteller calendar has been sent to all Storytellers. Conference calls are scheduled for the first Thursday of each month. They are important to attend as they give Storytellers a chance to connect with hyper local editors and trainers. Story submissions are due by the third Thursday of each month.

Stick to your deadline. Story submissions are due by the third Thursday of each month.

STEP 8: Get Social



City Storytellers are published on our playbook: www.TheCitizensCampaign.org/Playbook



Connect with The Citizens Campaign on [Facebook!](#) Tag us in your posts and use #civictrust. Like & share your post to increase your audience.



Connect with The Citizens Campaign on [Twitter!](#) Don't forget to tag us in your post and use the hashtag #civictrust. Like & retweet our posts to increase your audience.



You can create a video blog or "vlog," to share news via videos.

NEED MORE HELP?

If you need guidance, contact Juanita for help on becoming a City Storyteller at (732) 548-9798 x1, juanita@thecitizenscampaign.org.