



Workshop: How to Be a Foreign Correspondent

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THE PREPARATIONS:

1. **Become informed before you go.** Read and research widely, take classes, follow online newspapers in destination country, join listserves, study a primary language, gain awareness of safety issues.
2. **Make contacts before you leave.** Visit relevant cultural centres, attend cultural events. Request introductions to potential contacts in destination country, obtain information on NGOs in destination country, gather email addresses, phone numbers, addresses. Six degrees of separation. If you can find someone to live with, so much the better. Immerse. Don't do hotel journalism.
3. **Compile preliminary story ideas.** Use your information search and new contacts to generate a list of possible story ideas. Avoid limiting yourself to one kind of story. Consider the following: travel, business, popular culture, art, architecture, politics, environment. Consider various story-telling forms: radio, photography, magazines, newspapers, books, multimedia.
4. **Contact relevant editors/producers.** Let them know who you are, what you are doing, and that you will be pitching stories in the future. Send appropriate clips. Secure an assignment in advance if you have a hot idea. Otherwise, keep list of names/contact information for future pitches. Generally, you'll pitch later.
5. **Choose appropriate technologies.** Will you have a base to store sensitive equipment? Reliable electricity? Laptop vs. pen and paper. Voltages, adapters, condenser microphones, phones.

THE PROCESS:

1. **Find “nodes” to connect you to interview subjects.** Top sources: local journalists, aid workers, research associations. Use these connections as calling cards. Making contacts this way is useful when covering any subculture. People trust you more when you come through someone they know and trust.
2. **Research safety precautions.** Talk to local journalists/aid workers. Let people know where you are heading and who to contact if you don't return. Don't be stupid.
3. **Obtain press credentials.** When, why and how.
4. **Respect cultural customs.** Respect the norms of the population you wish to interview. This goes for local as well as foreign journalism. At the same time, there's no point in being a “try-hard.”
5. **Be a walking tape recorder with eyes.** In the words of the literary journalist Martha Gellhorn. Get more information that you need, especially where you won't be going back. Fact check as you go. Keep notes on surroundings. Jot down impressions. Look for the stories, anecdotes, telling details, that act as metaphors. Good stories that don't serve the structure are red herrings and will have to be cut.
6. **Secure your data.** Email data, transcripts, drafts and contact information to an external email account or leave copies in a separate residence. Destroy information that could cause trouble for yourself or others. Check through your belongings before passing through customs or border areas and keep names of interview subjects in separate notebooks. You have a responsibility to protect the safety of your interview subjects in a hostile environment.
7. **Tips for dealing with soldiers and security.** Be boring. When people get bored, they go away. Look nondescript. Do not volunteer information. Do not submit passively when you believe your rights are being violated. Remain calm.