

# Enterprise Story Ideas

**Use these not just on slow news weeks, but on a regular basis to add spice to the routine readers' diet of local government meeting reports and police coverage.**

1. Give a reporter or receptionist the phone book and have them read it for people in your community with famous names. Paul Newmans, Ron Reagans, Lonnie Andersons, Jaclyn Smiths and more, live in everybody's town. Each one of them has an interesting story to tell. Might even work into a series of short front-page "brights." Go after the anecdotal info. It is a must to have a picture of each of the famous named people in your community. Try to get their name in the picture, stand them beside their mailbox, showing their business card, holding a picture of their famous counterpart, etc. (Warning! You'll get calls if you leave somebody out. Be thorough.)

2. What are your schools doing about AIDS curriculum? Nothing? Why not? What grade gets first introduced to it? How? What do local medical people, parents, clergy think of the program or lack of one? An issue that must be dealt with responsibly. Sidebar could be how many AIDS cases reported in your region, what predictions are for future. Sidebar info could be in graphic form.

3. Goes well with #2. How are textbooks and curriculum selected in your schools? Good possibility for flow chart graphic. Have there been any controversial decisions made in these selections? Does anybody care what your town's young people are reading and learning. You might be surprised at some of the ideologies and biases they get in schools. Good opportunity for editorial follow-up, whether praising or criticizing.

4. Do you have homeless people in your community? Bet you do. Where are they? How do they survive? Visit them at the local soup kitchen. Talk to police and help agencies. Is enough being done for them? Show readers examples in words and pictures.

5. How do your local judges get chosen? Is there any performance review? Do voters ever have an opportunity to remove judges? Dig a little to compare sentences given in recent years. Is your judge consistent? Did the white collar embezzler of thousands get a lighter sentence than the poor kid who shoplifted a candy bar? Does your local or state bar association review judicial performance? Does the general public understand or care about judicial performance? Don't go in with preconceived bias.

6. How do your town's parks compare with cities throughout the state and nation? What is the state and national average on park acreage per 1,000 population? Do you have more or less? Are they well maintained? Is vandalism a problem? How much is spent each year maintaining your parks? Does anyone think that is too much, not enough? Is there a plan for future park development?

7. Localize the latest religious book or movie controversy? Talk to your local librarian or clergy about calls for censorship of things like "The Last Temptation of Christ" or Rushdie's "Satanic Verses."

8. The landmark farm bill of 1985 has had a dramatic effect on the way farmers operate. Do local ag producers think it has helped or hurt their operations? What is the local participation percentage in the conservation reserve program? How much money in total payments from all government sources is paid directly to farmers in your county? The figure might be shocking. Good graphics possibilities.

9. What is your town doing about solid waste? How much does it cost per ton to pick up and dispose of waste. Is a regional landfill being planned? Is recycling being used? What percentage of your landfill material comes from what sources? (Tell it graphically) Be ready ... in many cases paper, including newsprint, represents the greatest bulk percentage in landfills? A good sidebar would be your publisher explaining what your paper does about recycling your spoils and encouraging local recycling programs. If you don't help your local recycling Scouts or Clean Community group by bundling your spoils and giving them to the group, now would be a good time to start and give yourself a news story about how wonderful you are for doing it.

10. Where does your town get its water? Is the supply adequate and stable? What are the regular (required) EPA and Health Department tests saying about the quality of your town's water? Under severe drought conditions will it be necessary to ration? Are plans being made to develop other sources? Is there a local problem with groundwater contaminants in either public or private domestic wells? Are irrigation or ag practices affecting your water supply (chemigation, water table decline, etc.) Good graphics possibilities.

11. Has there ever been a navy ship named after your town? During the 1950's the Navy got all excited about promoting itself and began naming hundreds of WW II patrol boats and other ships which previously had gone just by numbers. They named them after small towns all over the country. You can call the Naval Archives office in Washington to see if there ever has been a ship with your town's name, what its history was and get a picture of it. A spin-off would be to contact some of the former crew members and invite them to your town to hold a reunion. They will have tons of anecdotal stories.

12. Most World War II veterans are now in their retirement years and we haven't met any yet who are reluctant to wax nostalgic about their war experiences. A good story series might be to interview individual vets about their experiences, what they did, where they did it, etc. There are some terrific stories out there that have never been told.

13. The ad staff will love this one--talk about the trends in local television viewing and how the viewing market is so diluted. Talk to the local cable company which now offers many times more channels than it did ten years ago. Talk to the video rental, Nintendo sales and satellite dish outlets. Talk to people who advertise on the tube. Talk to the local TV station. How are the viewer trends changing their businesses? Talk to couch potatoes and get their views. Good photo and graphics capabilities. Top reader interest. Don't make it look like a "slam the tube piece." Remember your readers spend more time with TV than they do with your paper.

14. Town rivalries make for great copy. Dealt with openly and objectively, good newspaper coverage can help overcome some of the long-standing bitterness between rival towns. (Or help fan the flames). What is at the root of the hatred between Podunk and Your Town? Did they fight over who would get the county seat? Was it the 1932 regional basketball championship? Was it something mayor Whatsit said? How does the rift hurt the communities today? Is anyone doing anything to try to bring the towns closer together? Or do both towns have economic developers who fight it out for every new factory that sniffs around?

15. Your state probably has a vital statistics bureau. How does your county compare with state and national birth and death rates? What are people in your county dying from? Is it different than other areas? How does your marriage and divorce rate compare? Analyze the stats and get input from expert sources on the reasons your area might be different.

16. Vital stats are great sources for localized stories. What is the trend in naming babies in your community? Why are those names popular? What are the most popular names nationally? A baby name book at the library is needed to help answer those questions and others.

17. Some of the most successful people in your community own and use beat-up old pickup trucks. These owners swear by their old trucks and are not ashamed to be seen driving them. What is the attraction to ugly old pickups? Who's got the most dash board clutter? Are they costly to own and maintain? What are they used for the most? What are your county's registration figures on trucks older than ten years and what is that percentage of the total vehicles in the county? Bet the local bank president even owns one.

18. What are home values doing in your community? Chart their rise or fall graphically over the last few years and talk to real estate people and taxing agencies about the impact these changes have on the community.

19. Do the same as above with farm and rural property.

20. Do men in your community go to a barber or a hairstylist. Do any of them get their hair permed? Are women going to barbers now? Talk to barbers and hairdressers about changing styles and the breakdown of past customs. Talk to men who get perms and women with barber cuts. Good picture possibilities.

21. What is your city council members' attendance record at council meetings? How much do they get paid to attend each meeting? Most get paid whether they are there or not and chances are the percentage of meetings they attend is less than 80 percent. Some might be as low as 50 percent. Check the minutes at city hall over the past year and compute how many of the total meetings each council member attended. The figures will shock you, your readers and especially the council members. Don't be afraid to talk about excellent attendance figures if that is what they post. Ninety percent would be exceptional.

22. What intersection in town records the highest number of traffic accidents? Why? What

should be done to correct the situation? Follow up editorially. Make the corner your pet project with accident photos and stories every time something happens there.

23. How many places are there to eat out in your town? Count them up and it will surprise you. Don't forget the convenience stores (they are the largest sellers of ready to-eat foods of any restaurant chain or industry). The sandwich counter at the courthouse and the airport should also be included as well as the delis at the grocery stores. Even the smallest towns probably have a couple dozen places to eat. List them and explain what they have to offer. Good sidebar or peg would be how American eating habits have changed and why. Talk to nutritionists about this trend.

24. Is illiteracy on the rise in your town? Why? Are adults learning to read and write? Who helps them? Talk to librarians, school officials, factory managers etc. about the importance of reading and literacy.

25. What are the reading habits in your community? Is your library putting in "a line of videos and books on audio tape? Does your librarian see this as bad or good? What about the shrinking time people spend with the printed word? What are her predictions for the future?

26. If you poll your readers on what they want most in their hometown paper and one of the top three, if not the top response, will be stories about people. Implement a weekly feature or profile of an individual. Call it Podunk Profiles or Your Neighbors or some such lively name. Put it on the same page every week. A graphic with the featured person's name, age, occupation, book last read, hobbies, favorite thing about Podunk, will help dress up the page, as well pulled quotes as sub-heads. Take four or five mugs of the individual with different expressions to add to the art aspect. Interview ordinary people in your town. Ask them about current issues in addition to their background and future plans. Some of the most interesting ones might be youngsters. Talk to a 10-year-old about current issues and the future and you have yourself one of the most readable features you'll ever run. Good interview techniques a must.

27. You've got people in your schools, at your local college, in local professions who are experts on anything and everything. Use them as localizing sources. The humanities professor that toured the Middle East last year might have some insights into the latest airport bombing and security problems there. The economics professor might be able to make the current stock market situation understandable to local readers. The agricultural extension agent might be able to help readers understand the recent Common Market trade sanctions that affect local cattle and grain producers. What is your local police chief's position on the banning of the sale of assault rifles following the latest mass murder? Use the local experts to localize national events.

28. Young women today are taking up some of the traditional practices of their grandmothers like crocheting, quilting and other forms of traditional crafts. Why do they like these hobbies? Is there enough time for them? Do they remember things their grandmothers told them?

29. The non-working mother is dead. Not only do most women have jobs outside the home,

those that don't take great offense if asked "do you work?" The women who stay home and raise a family (which is work in anybody's book) are in a minority today. How do they see their role? Do they get offended when people ask them "do you work?" Is it almost a financial necessity? Did they give up successful careers to stay home with the kids? What do they like, dislike about being homemakers (in a minority).

30. Related to above--what are the child day care opportunities for working parents in your community? Any businesses offering day care for employees with families? What are the costs? What are the licensing requirements for day care providers? Provide a graphic with mobilizing information on the existing day care centers in your town and their costs.

31. How has the AIDS scare affected the way emergency personnel respond to accidents? What special precautions are they taking?

32. Who's that back in school? Adult continuing education is popular in most communities. What is offered in your area and who is taking advantage of it? If you have a college nearby, look at the average age of students. It's growing dramatically what with the non-typical students. Retirees, divorcees, displaced workers are all back in school for personal enrichment and career development.

33. Kids are great sources no matter what the subject. Ask first or second graders at Thanksgiving how to cook a turkey.

34. Ask second graders what advice they might have for first graders just starting their first week of school.

35. Send a reporter to the school for lunch during National School Lunch Week. Have the big kid sit with the other kids and report on their typical discussions about the food, movies, teachers, clothes, boys, girls, playground and lunchroom etiquette and life in general.

36. What kind of New Year's resolutions do first graders make?

37. If these walls could talk ... Work with the local historical society or history buff on a series of stories on the historic buildings in your community. The hardware store maybe was the old opera house, the newspaper office used to be a brothel, the first church built in town is still in use. Each building has a story and a couple of photos, one then and one now.

38. What is the state of religion in your town? How many churches do you have? What is the percentage of churchd to unchurchd people. Are your local ministers satisfied? What are they doing to get the unchurchd into the fold? What problems do they face?

39. Related to above, with the downfall of noted television evangelists, have the " ministers in your community seen any increase in local church attendance? What do they think about the tele-evangelist situation?

40. A recent Time magazine cover story decried poor service in the retail and service industries

all across the nation. What is customer service like in your town? Are clerks rude, unhelpful, poorly trained? Does your Chamber of Commerce offer customer service education and promotion among retailers and service employees? Are they listening? Be careful not to offend any advertisers with this one, but remember a well done piece on this problem might help solve a serious attitude problem in your town.

41. What are the current dos and don'ts in proper Valentine giving etiquette among elementary students. They are not as bashful as we used to be.

42. What is the biggest unsolved crime in your town in the last five years? Get your file out and rehash the case. Why haven't police been able to solve it? Are there other cases open? Is this a trend? Talk to the victims.

43. What happens to shoplifters in your town? Many businesses would appreciate a story on this. Does the judicial system handle these cases to their satisfaction? Do businesses prosecute? Why and why not?

44. Same as above with bad check writers.

45. A couple of years ago many states wrote stiffer laws dealing with drunk drivers. MADD and SADD have worked hard for tougher penalties and better education. What has the effect been? Is the drunk driver still a menace in your town? Have the statistics changed any? Gotten worse? Are police enforcing the law? Do judges use the new penalties? How many drunk drivers have lost their licenses in your county?

46. Here's a tough one. How does your town deal with suicides? Are they on the rise especially among young people? What should a friend do if their friend threatens suicide? Is there counseling available? Do you have a hotline? Is it busy? Talk to the local mental health professionals and flat ask for their advice on the best way to handle this story without creating more of a problem than you are trying to solve. Statistics show that news coverage which glamorizes suicides and the lives of those who commit them can directly encourage copycats. Don't do this story as a knee-jerk reaction to a suicide in your town. It takes careful timing and planning. You might even want to have a professional counselor read your copy prior to publication.

47. Does anybody care about civil defense any more? Does your town even have fallout shelters marked and stocked any more? Most don't. Do any individual families have home shelters? What is the civil defense plan for your town in case of nuclear war? Are you to be a host for thousands from the neighboring metropolitan area or is everyone to be evacuated somewhere else? Are you a target?

48. What are the jail standards in your town? How much does it cost to keep and feed prisoners? Do you have to provide them with television and entertainment, excellent food, nice cells? Who inspects your jail and does it meet standards? Many readers will be amazed to find out what they are paying to keep prisoners in what is often better living conditions than most people in the world enjoy.

49. Ever hear the complaint that the only time newspapers ever write about young people is when they mess up? You can address these kinds of comments with a regular feature called "Youth on the Right Track" or some more clever title. Write a short profile on young people who achieve significant and even average accomplishments in your community. There are hundreds of activities they are involved in that would work well in this feature. What you'll have is a real "clip and save" gold mine for paper sales.

50. You think the cost of living is high in your town? Compare your local homeowners and auto insurance rates with what a homeowner or motorist pays in New York or Los Angeles. Why is it cheaper? Or isn't it?

51. Government deregulation sounds great, but what has it done to the small town? What has happened to banking services, phones, freight, airlines, railroads and other traditionally regulated businesses in your town since the deregulation boom? Talk to the people who rely on these services. Talk to small town community leaders. Is anyone happy with deregulation?

52. Foster care parents have been given a black eye by a few highly publicized abuses of the foster care system. There are good, loving, caring parent's out, there who still offer good home environments to children in need. Are they harder to find? Do social service workers see a change in the role of foster homes and parents?

53. Computers in the home: Who has them? For what are they being used? Are they fulfilling their expected tasks or do they just gather dust? Talk to users, computer retailers. What do they recommend to those interested? Did everybody take an introductory class? Is one available? Is anybody scared of computers any more?

54. Do your own analysis of the foreign trade deficit in your town. What is the percentage of American made electronics offered for sale in your town compared to foreign? Check the ratio of foreign car registrations in your county compared to domestic.

55. Send a reporter/photographer to the State Capitol and have him/her follow your state senator or representative around for a day. You might be surprised to learn they really do earn their salary or is it as you suspect, the reporter will come back having spent all day watching Sen. Bellfry have coffee.

56. The banking industry is in a period of high change. What affect is the troubled thrift situation having on your home town banks and S&Ls? What affect will it have? What is the availability of competing out of town banking services that weren't there ten years ago? What problems does this create for your bank? Where do people keep their life savings? In their local bank where it can be reinvested in the community or in a high yield CD with Mega-Conglomerate Insurance Co.?

57. Whose name is that on the street sign or front of the public building? Do a history piece on who things were named after in your town. Who is famous in your town who has nothing named after them? Whip up the local historical society and wage yourself a good old fashioned editorial crusade to name the square after the patriarch or professional football quarterback or some such local boy or girl that has made good.

58. What are the most prestigious occupations in your community? Poll the kids in the careers class at the high school? Which occupations do they admire most? Why? Try to get them to consider the choice on something besides a monetary basis. Which professionals, laborers or business people do they look up to the most?

59. Who watches the weather in your town? Talk to both the professionals and the amateurs. What is the worst they have seen? This story is a good way to develop future sources of information for storm stories. Have federal budget cuts threatened the weather recording station in your town? What do the experts think about the greenhouse effect? Remember, more people talk about the weather than any other subject.

60. Prepare a confidential questionnaire on drug use, teen sex or other controversial issues and circulate it to high school kids. Report their views on these issues. Do they talk to their parents about these problems?

61. Fifteen or so years after Proposition 13, (heralded as a property owner's revolution) what has been the effect on property taxes in your community? What has been the percentage of increase (dare we say decrease) of taxes since the revolution? How does that compare with the cost of living in those 15 years?

62. Are the smokers ready to quit yet or have they been badgered into armed rebellion? There aren't many places you can go and light up in peace. How is America's new minority coping? Want some background and propaganda? Call Phillip Morris Co. and they'll be right over.

63. How are the veterans' clubs holding out for memberships now that the numbers of World War II vets are on the decline. Have they been able to attract the Vietnam vets. Nearly 20 years of peace is making some veterans organizations rethink their membership rules? How are your clubs doing?

64. Is it legal in your community to ride bicycles on downtown sidewalks? Where do skateboards and scooters fit in legally? Look at the city code book and you may find some interesting language banning velocipedes and wheelbarrows and other contrivances from downtown sidewalks. Are these codes enforced today? Do you have problems in your community with kids, or even adults, acting as kamikaze bike riders?

65. What are the senior citizens clubs doing in your area? Are there more of them than there were a few years ago? You might consider letting them produce a monthly tab newspaper with stories, poems, photos of their activities, senior center schedules, etc. The tab would be an excellent medium for advertisers wishing to reach seniors.

66. What do you do in the event of an emergency when you need a doctor? The kid has a 105 degree fever at midnight and there's no such thing as the kindly family doctor who makes house calls any more? Can you always be assured of a doctor at the local emergency room? Even at midnight and on holidays? Do you have to have proof of insurance or pay cash before you can get treatment? When was the last house call made in your town?

67. Who drives free cars among public officials in your town? City employees, county employees, state employees, school officials all have access to free transportation. Do they drive the vehicles home at night? Do they use them for personal business? How much does this benefit cost the taxpayers?

68. What are some of the hobbies of people in your area? Things like woodworking, quilting, unusual collecting and many more all make good stories. Could even be a series or regular feature.

69. Do you have a closet industrial base in people who make and market high quality hobby craft items in their homes? Do you have a local market outlet for them? Is anyone interested in creating an outlet? How?

70. What laws control signs locally? Can anyone put up a sign on city utility poles and leave it there for the city (and therefore the taxpayers) to remove?

71. Interview and get pictures of five or so rookie teachers, or even student teachers from the local college, after a month or so of school. What's happening to them (funny, serious, etc.) and report their reactions to teaching.

72. The same could work with other occupations like police officers, retailers, postmen, fast food clerks and more. Was it what they expected?

73. What does the local police department do with confiscated weapons, booze, dope, etc. before and after these items are needed as evidence in court proceedings? Any of it ever turn up missing?

74. Check the churches and social service organizations for names and activities of "Good Samaritans" in your area. Some might want to remain anonymous. Okay, but try to talk to the people they have helped too.

75. You think you've got it tough, try his job. Have a reporter spend a shift working various jobs in the community and report on his experiences. Chose the fun ones like garbage collector, all night police dispatcher, over-the-road truck driver, and more.

76. With the government emphasis on regional planning, how many agencies serve your area. Who is doing what, why? Any duplications?

77. How many jobs in your community are provided by some form of government? Include

schools, community action agencies which operate with federal funding, county, city, state, federal, regional. What is the annual payroll and percentage of the total workforce? It could shock you.

78. How honest are people? Put a \$5 bill in half a dozen envelopes and address them to a reporter's home. Include a note "Here's the five dollars I owe you..." Then drop them near the corner mailbox or at the post office. Report on how many of the letters make it to the reporter's home.

79. Check the local dog pound or Humane Society on the number of pets euthanized each month. The figures can be staggering and provide a powerful story on the failure of dog and cat owners to control the pet population.

80. Do a series, or at least an occasional story on local artists. Reproduce examples of their work. Show them at work. Talk to them about their chosen field.

81. The broken home: A good series possibility on a divorced man and woman and their family. Interview all parties. What problems do they have and how are they trying to solve them? Talk to ministers, school counselors, lawyers, bankers, etc. to get insights into the growing problem of divorce in your community. How many kids in each class at school come from broken homes?

82. Stir up sports fans with a series selecting the all-time all-star basketball, football, baseball team in your community. Ask for readers input, you'll get it.

83. Send a reporter out with a role of nickels or even dimes, and ask him to spend them one at a time. Is there anything you can buy for a dime anymore? When they get back to the office spread the loot out on a desk top and take a picture. Have the reporter write the article in first person.

84. Do a feature on the typical newly-arrived housewife in your town. What are her impressions? Problems adjusting? Strange things she notices about life in your town? Come back a year later and see if she has changed her opinions.

85. A regular round-up of interviews with new residents in town works well also. Talk about what they like and dislike. Are there common threads? What have they had problems with? Then follow up with public officials and businesses they have had problems with to see if there is a solution.

86. How do you get a pay raise? Interview bosses and personnel managers to find out the dos and dont's.

87. How do underlings, both men and women, react to the growing number of women bosses?

88. How do you start a new business? Everybody thinks running a business is so easy. Is it?

Interview those who have started their own. How did they start? What problems did they face? What would they tell others contemplating their own business?

89. How do you apply for a job? Have five top businessmen or personnel directors give their views and tips.

90. The military recruiter has changed. Should we call him a recruiter or screener. Entrance requirements have changed. What he is looking for today in young people may be entirely different than what he wanted 20 years ago. What are the incentives for a military career today?

91. Follow up on the above. Talk to several enlistees from your community who have been in the military for six months or a year. Are they getting the training and career opportunities they expected? Do they see it as a job or a career? Will they re-enlist? What advice do they have for other young people considering the military?

92. "Let us introduce"-- Make this a weekly feature of about 3 inches of copy with a mug of some newcomer in town. Work with the Welcome Wagon to get the material. Especially good for smaller papers.

93. A weekend in jail. Have a reporter go undercover for a full weekend in jail. Report the findings and reactions.

94. What are the 10 most often asked questions at the library? What books are most read?

95. Tell the human drama and comedy of your traffic court. Interview the winners and losers.

96. Where were the crimes committed in your community during the last year? Use a graphic map to tell the story of where the high crime areas are. Interview the police investigator and get advice for people on how to avoid being a victim.

97. Who holds city and county government insurance contracts? Trash hauling contracts? Depository of funds? Vehicle service and tires? Auditing? And more? Are any of the contractors connected to the government agency? Have relatives in the government?

98. What are the top 20 or 25 government/educational (public financed) jobs in your community? It's public information.

99. What is the ratio of administrators to teachers in your school system? In numbers and salaries? How about women administrators? How do your figures compare with other school systems?

100. What are the school dropout figures in your town? Why? How do they compare with averages elsewhere? Talk to dropouts, school officials, parents, business people (about employability).

101. Compare salaries of public safety personnel (police and fire) with other occupations. What about hours worked, etc.?

102. Alcoholism: How serious is the problem in numbers, dollars, statistics in your area? Is it growing among teens? Talk to police, judges, doctors, families, counselors, ministers and alcoholics.

103. Can senior citizens survive on social security and pensions? Factual story on old age benefits (good and bad) and sidebars quoting the people involved would be well-read.

104. What has been the effect of Medicare in your community? Talk to the hospital administrator about the hoops that must be jumped through and the limits on what he gets reimbursed for. What do senior citizens have to say about the programs?

105. Do you have residents who have undergone heart bypass or other major medical procedures? You may discover a group of them who have many things in common, both then and now.

106. Where does the blood come from at your hospital? Who pays for it? How is it screened for AIDS? How does your community respond to blood donor drives now that we have the AIDS scare? Are people in your community drawing and storing their own blood for future operations?

107. What agricultural commodities are produced for sale in your county? List everything. Now list all the commodities that have ever been produced in your county for sale. It will make an interesting and surprising list. Why don't your farmers still grow rutabagas? Anybody trying Belgian Endive? Marijuana's a cash crop too, maybe the biggest.

108. Related to #30. Are there any house-husbands in your town? Any guys there taken paternity leave to stay home with the new baby? Guys with wives who make more than they do? How have our traditional roles changed and how are those involved in changing those roles coping?

109. Who decides when to cancel school? Superintendents will tell you that is one of the most difficult and controversial decisions they have to make. Have they ever made the wrong choice? Cancelled school when the weather turned nice? Have they had kids in class when the bad forecast was right? Get the anecdotal information.

110. Does your town or county have a strategic plan? If it does, get it off the shelf and dust it off? When was it prepared? Have any of the goals been met? If you don't have a plan, why not? Surely, someone in local government has looked ahead and set some goals for the future. Are they attainable? Who is working on achieving those goals?

111. Do a photo feature on executive desks or executive offices in your community? Which management style works, cluttered desk or clean desk? Who has got the nicest office? Who's is the worst? Talk to a business professor at the local college on the principles of office decor.