

# **Reporters' Handbook**

**A Quick Guide to the  
ABC's of Good Journalism**



**CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS FOUNDATION**

**EDUCATING TOMORROW'S CITIZENS**

# 1. What is News?

News is essentially new information or current events. The word "news" comes from the plural of the word "new." See also, "What is Newsworthy?" on page 3 of this Reporters' Handbook.

News is reported by newspapers, television and radio programs, web sites, and wire services. Most news is investigated and presented by journalists (or reporters). If the news is significant enough, it may become history.

News categories include hard news (more serious and timely topics), soft news (usually lighter topics), breaking news (most immediate), news analysis, and investigative reporting.

Types of articles include:

**Local news:** Focuses on what's going on in your community. Example: An article on a city council meeting.

**National news:** Focuses on what's happening in the United States. Example: An article on the U.S. Senate passing a new bill.

**International news:** Focuses on news that's happening outside the United States. Example: A story on an influenza outbreak in Chile.

**Feature article:** Often covering lighter, or soft news topics. A feature may be a profile of a person, a cultural trend, a place, and other topics. Feature articles are not considered news stories.

**Opinion or Commentary:** Contains the writer's opinion, usually backed up with facts and other information. Opinion articles often focus on current events, but are not considered news stories.

**Review:** A review is an essay or article that gives a critical evaluation of a book, play, film, a musical recording or performance, or other art form. Reviews are not considered news stories.

## 2. What's Newsworthy?

*When a dog bites a man, that is not news....But if a man bites a dog, that is news.*

--John B. Bogart (1845-1921), city editor of the *New York Sun*

News has to be factual, but it must also be presented in an interesting way. To be newsworthy, a news story should contain some of the following elements:

**Impact.** How many people were affected by the person or event? How will it affect them and for how long?

**Discovery.** Is there significant new information, previously unknown?

**Timeliness.** Something just happened or is going to happen very soon.

**Proximity.** Something that happens close by often attracts interest more than something that is happening far away.

**Prominence.** People are interested in well-known people, places, events, important dates and critical situations.

**Human interest.** A dramatic, personal story about people has universal appeal.

**Suspense.** People want to know...what's going to happen next?

**Unusual.** Out of the ordinary. Dog bites man is not news. Man bites dog *is* news.

**Conflict.** Stories that happen because of opposing needs, points of view, or actions, such as a controversy over voting age.

**Progress.** Improvements in technology, a new record set, humankind moving forward makes news.

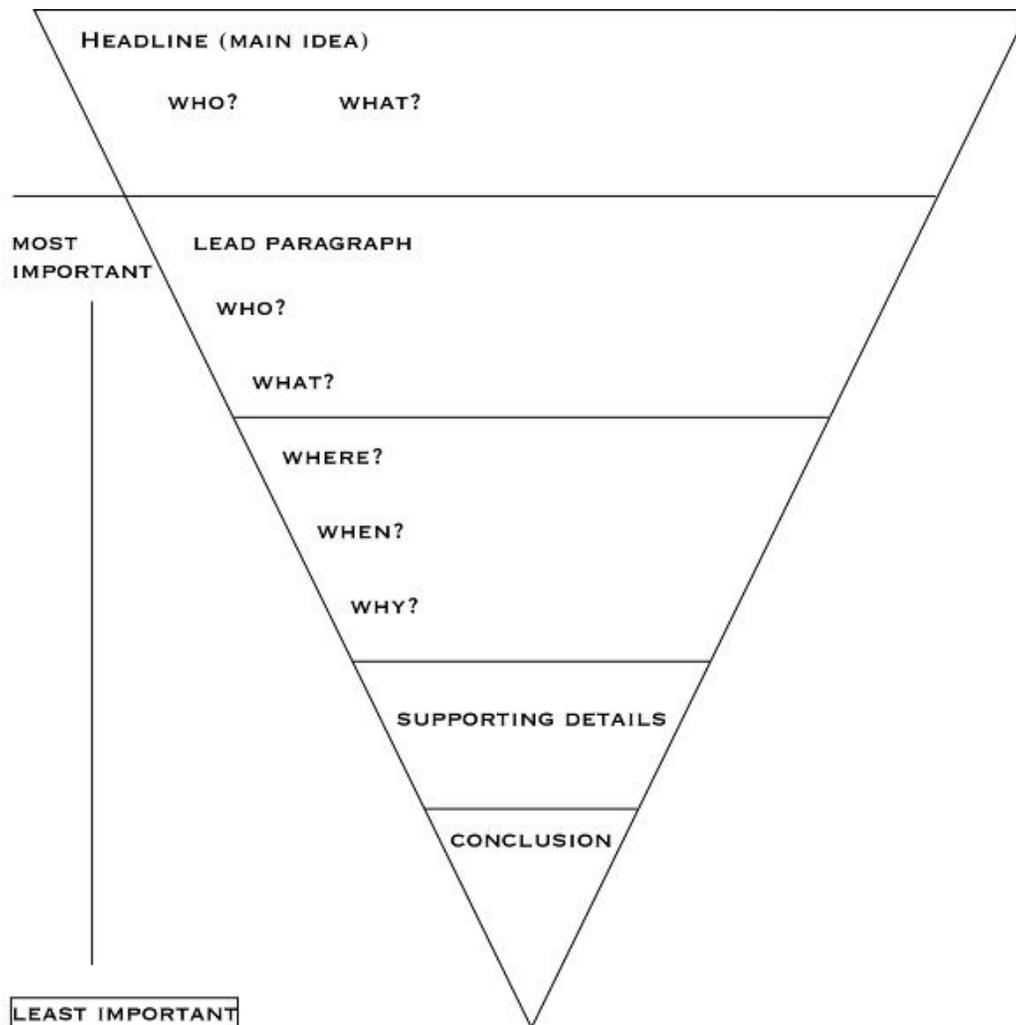
**Age.** A person who does things expected of someone younger or older raises interest.

**Humor.** People like to laugh. For example, what happens when a player scores a goal for the wrong team?

### 3. Creating Good Journalism

Good journalism isn't a mystery. It happens when journalists follow a series of rules and guidelines that have been developed over years.

**Use the inverted pyramid.** Think of good journalistic writing as taking the shape of an inverted pyramid.



The **inverted pyramid** puts the most newsworthy information in one or two sentences at the top. This top information is often called **the lead** (see next page). When you begin a story, give the **5W1H** (see next page), the what, who, when, where, why, and how of the story in the lead. The remaining information should follow in order of importance.

**Be impartial.** Unless you are writing an opinion piece, your job is to report facts and the opinions of others. Leave your own opinions out of a news story!

**Watch out for long sentences.** You don't need to spend time counting. Just be aware that news-story sentences and paragraphs can be much shorter than what you use when writing, say, an essay.

**Check your sources.** Where does your information come from? For example, if you get information from the Internet, how can you tell if it is reliable? When possible, use more than one source. The more people you talk to, the better the article. You can use direct quotes or paraphrase what someone says, but always remember to identify who says what.

## Useful Terms

**5W1H:** Information that answers the following questions: Who? What? Why? Where? When? and How? Try to answer all these questions briefly in the lead. You can explain them in depth later in the article.

**Angle:** A particular point of view or way of looking at a subject.

**Bias.** Slanted. In a news story describing conflict or controversy, bias results from the absence of an equal or balanced presentation of differing or opposing viewpoints.

**Editorializing.** The term for introducing your own opinion into a story. Try not to do this unless you are writing an opinion piece!

**Fact-checking.** Check that your facts are correct. Look up the names of (1) specific people, (2) places, and (3) information you are presenting as fact to be sure you are stating the truth accurately.

**Headline.** A title or attention grabber above the body of an article.

**Lead.** The opening of a story, usually a summary of the most important information.

## 4. How to Conduct an Interview

Getting a good interview at a press conference takes a lot of skill. Here are some tips for getting the most information possible in the least amount of time:

**Plan ahead.** Write down your interview questions ahead of time. Be sure your questions will help you answer the what, who, when, where, why, and how of the story.

**Make contact.** Be patient and polite. Ask your questions as clearly and simply as possible.

**Keep on track.** Some people ramble and change the subject when they talk. Make sure the person answers your question...You only have one chance!

**Take good notes.** Make sure you get the facts. Without good notes, you may not be able to remember what was said.

**Write down quotes "verbatim."** Verbatim means "word for word." Listen for good quotes. Take down quotes verbatim if the person you are interviewing says something:

- More descriptive than you could write.
- In a unique or unusual manner.
- That the reader needs to hear exactly to understand its meaning.

## 5. SEARCH: How to Check Internet Sources

To use the Internet as a research tool, it is important to evaluate the information you find there. Use this quick guide to analyze the truthfulness and reliability of a web site. You can also use this SEARCH checklist to check information from books, magazines, radio and television broadcasts or newspapers.

**Sources.** Who sponsors the web site? Are they advocates of a particular position? What bias, if any, can you detect? Who created the web page you are using? What are their qualifications? What bias, if any, can you detect?

**Errors.** Are there any obvious errors—dates, names, historical facts—in the web site materials?

**Apply.** If information you find on a web site advocates a biased position, you can apply that information by describing the bias you see in the source, for example, “Congressman Smith, an advocate for curfews, states that “curfews are the only way to keep our children safe.”

**Research.** Check the Internet material you want to use by finding least two additional sources on the same subject. (books, periodicals, or other web sites).

**Comprehensive or Controversial?** Does the web site present more than one view or document on the subject or issue? If a controversial issue is presented, does the web site provide other points of view?

**Hyperlinks.** Does the web site provide links to other sites? What are their nature and quality? Do the links advocate the same view? If not, how do they differ?

## 6. Journalism Resources

### **Appalachian Media Institute**

<http://www.appalshop.org/ami/index.htm>

Young people in eastern Kentucky use video cameras and audio equipment to document life in their mountain communities.

### **HarlemLive**

<http://www.harlemlive.org/main.html>

A New York-based web magazine and journalism, technology and leadership program that teaches students how to run an online newspaper.

### **Journalism Resources, University of Iowa**

<http://bailiwick.lib.uiowa.edu/journalism/>

Includes news archives, information sources, reference, statistics & science, government, economic and policy links, cyber journalism, and more.

### **Journalistic Resources Page**

<http://www.markovits.com/journalism/>

Resources for students and journalists to access information on the Internet, links to journalism schools, and more.

### **L.A. Youth Newspaper**

[http://www.layouth.com/0\\_0.htm](http://www.layouth.com/0_0.htm)

A Los Angeles-based newspaper and web site that publishes articles for and by teenagers.

### **OnRamp Arts: Communities Transforming Arts & Technology**

<http://www.onramparts.org/>

A digital arts organization in central Los Angeles that creates, produces, and distributes collaborative new media projects.

### **Poynter Online**

<http://www.poynter.org/>

A school for journalists and future journalists with lots of free online resources and “how to” articles.

### **Project Express**

<http://www.pry.org/express.htm>

A national teen journalism program providing instruction in journalism, and creative writing, and practical experience in newspaper publication.

### **Resources for Journalists from Writers Write**

<http://www.writerswrite.com/journalism/jlink.htm>

Includes blogging resources, journalism books, broadcast journalism links, journalistic ethics, history, newsgroups, general writing resources and more.

**Student Press Law Center**

<http://www.splc.org/>

Information, advice, and free legal assistance about free-press rights for students and the teachers who work with them.

**Writing and Editing Help**

<http://www.mnstate.edu/gunarat/ijr/writing.html>

Introduces an array of Internet help available to young journalists with a focus on copy editing and media writing.

**Youth Free Expression Network**

<http://www.yfen.org/pages/about/aboutyfen.htm>

A national coalition of teens and adults committed to defending the free expression rights of youth.

**Youth Media Program: Open Society Institute**

[http://www.soros.org/initiatives/youth/focus\\_areas/youth\\_media](http://www.soros.org/initiatives/youth/focus_areas/youth_media)

Provides opportunities for authentic self-expression while teaching young people the practical and ethical aspects of journalism.

**Youth Media Resources**

<http://www.freechild.org/YouthMediaResources.htm>

Provides resources for young people who want to create media that represents their voice and experience.

**There's plenty more to find. Just start Googling!!!**

# Good Journalism Worksheet

Know good journalism when you read it! Use the news article you have been given and the Inverted Pyramid from the Reporters Handbook to:

- 1) Look in the news article for the good journalism elements listed below.
- 2) For each element, answer the questions.

## Good Journalism Elements

### **Headline**

Use the headline of the article. Describe the **who** and **what** of the story.

Who?

What?

### **Lead Paragraph**

Using the lead paragraph of the article, answer the **5W1H** questions listed below.

Who?

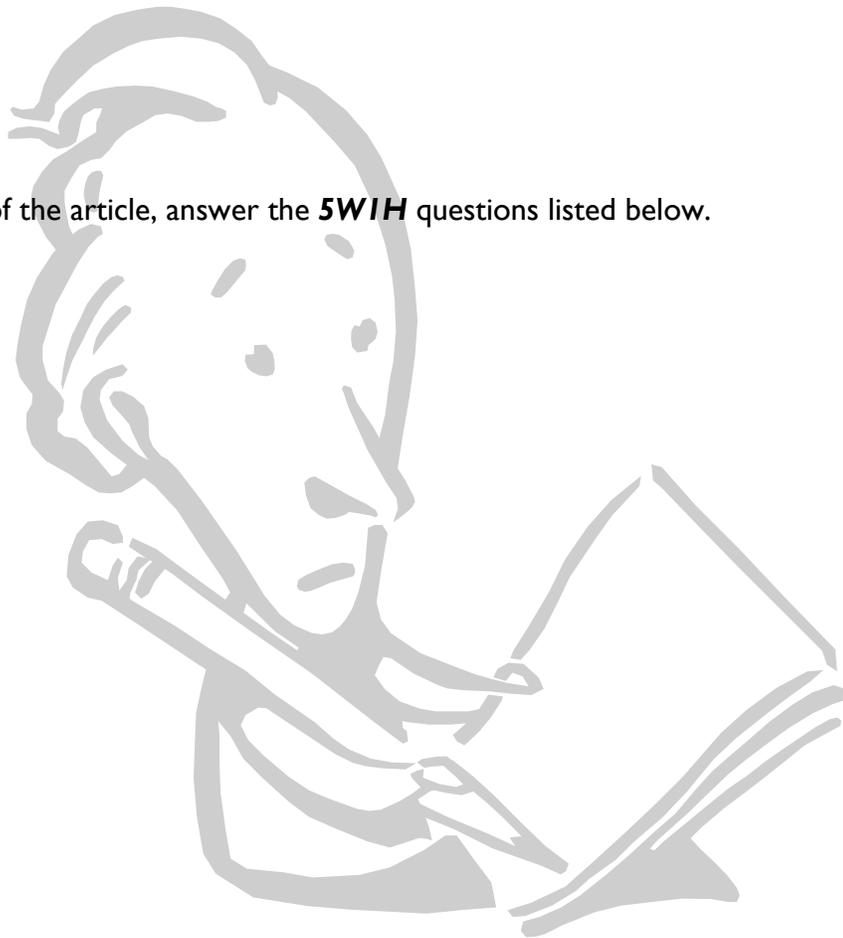
What?

Where?

When?

Why?

How?



## **Good Journalism Worksheet**

### **Impartial**

Did the reporter leave his/her opinions out of the story?

If not, what did they say that was impartial (expressed an opinion of the reporter)?

### **Balance**

Did the article present different points of view? Name any points of view you found in the article.

### **Sources**

Does the article use facts to tell the story?

List any facts you find in the story.

How does the article describe the source of these facts?

**Interviewer:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Subject:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Forming Interview Questions

Choose a topic below and break into pairs. Using the Reporters Handbook—How to Conduct an Interview, write questions to interview each other about one of the following topics:

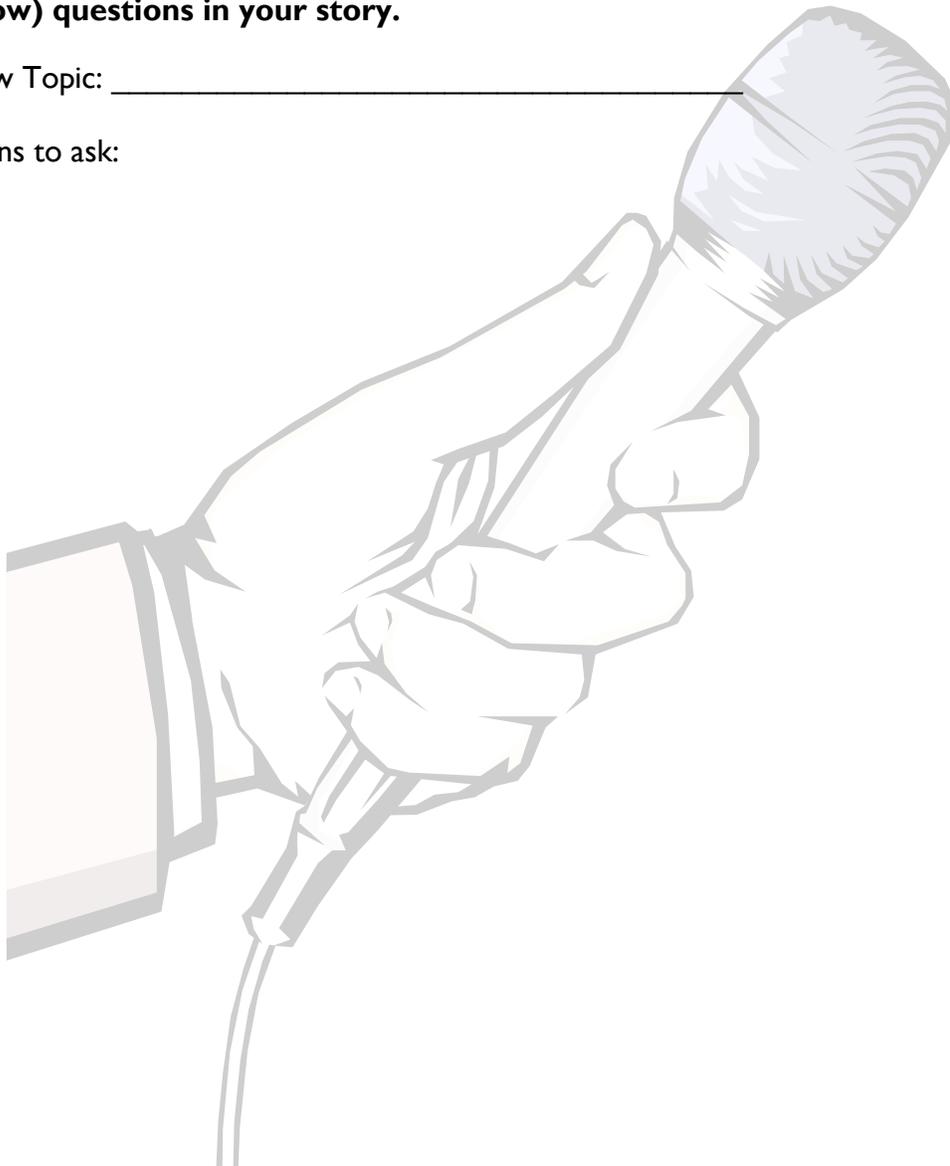
- Your first day of high school.
- A time you were embarrassed.
- The first time you traveled to another city, state, or country.
- A time you were frustrated or challenged.
- A time you overcame an obstacle.

**Be sure your questions will allow you to answer the 5W1H (who, what, when, where, why, how) questions in your story.**

Interview Topic: \_\_\_\_\_

Questions to ask:

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)
- 5)
- 6)
- 7)
- 8)
- 9)
- 10)



# Recording Interview Answers

**Interview Topic:** \_\_\_\_\_

Conduct the interview and use this handout to write down notes during the interview. Once the interview is complete, use the Inverted Pyramid in the Reporters Handbook to write a one-paragraph story about the topic you have chosen.

**WHAT?**

**WHO?**

**WHEN?**

**WHERE?**

**WHY?**

**HOW?**

# Article Outline Sheet

Using the Reporters Handbook—Creating Good Journalism (Inverted Pyramid), develop an outline for your article.

**Headline (Main Idea):**

**Who?**

**What?**

**Lead Paragraph**

**Who?**

**What?**

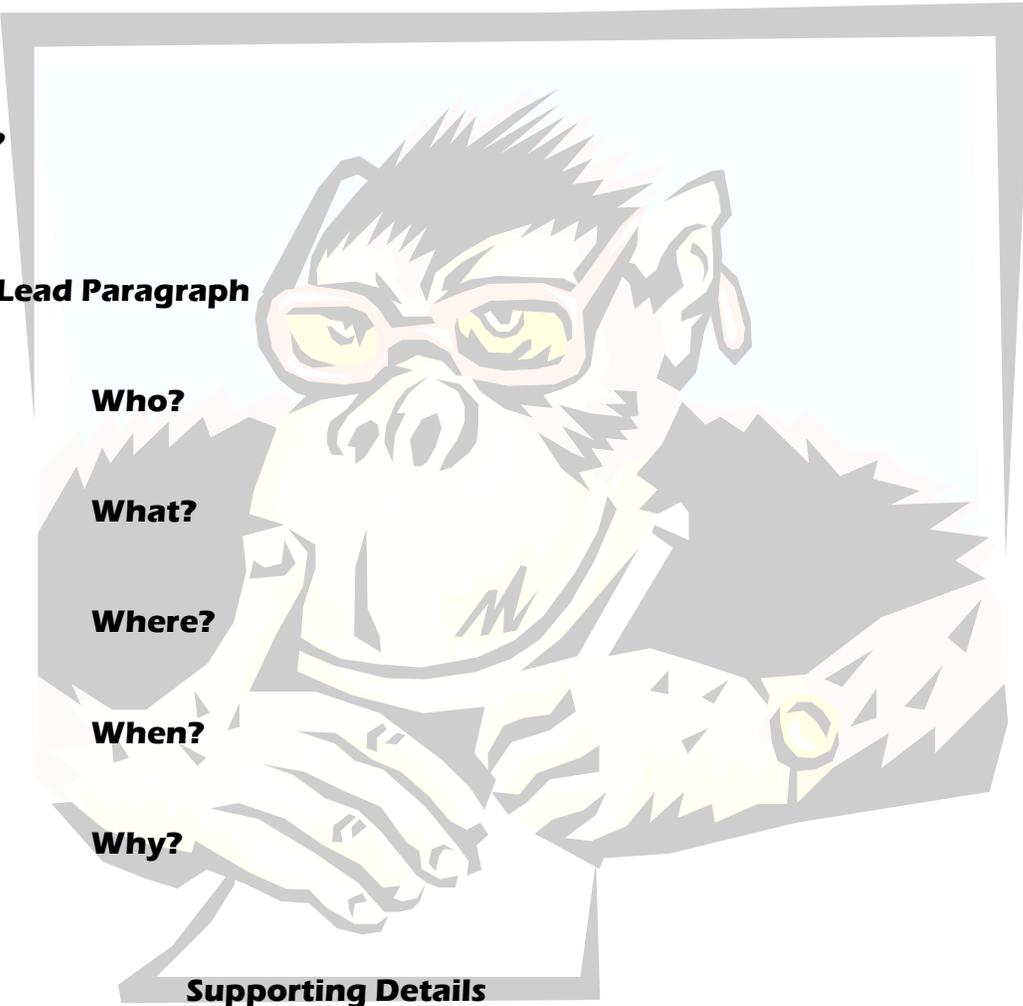
**Where?**

**When?**

**Why?**

**Supporting Details**

**Conclusion**



# Research/Source Log

Using the Reporters Handbook as a guide, conduct preliminary research on the computer. Collect information related to your topic, check its accuracy, and log your sources below. Make sure to write down the Internet address—so you can refer back to the source another time.

**Source #1:**

**Source #2:**

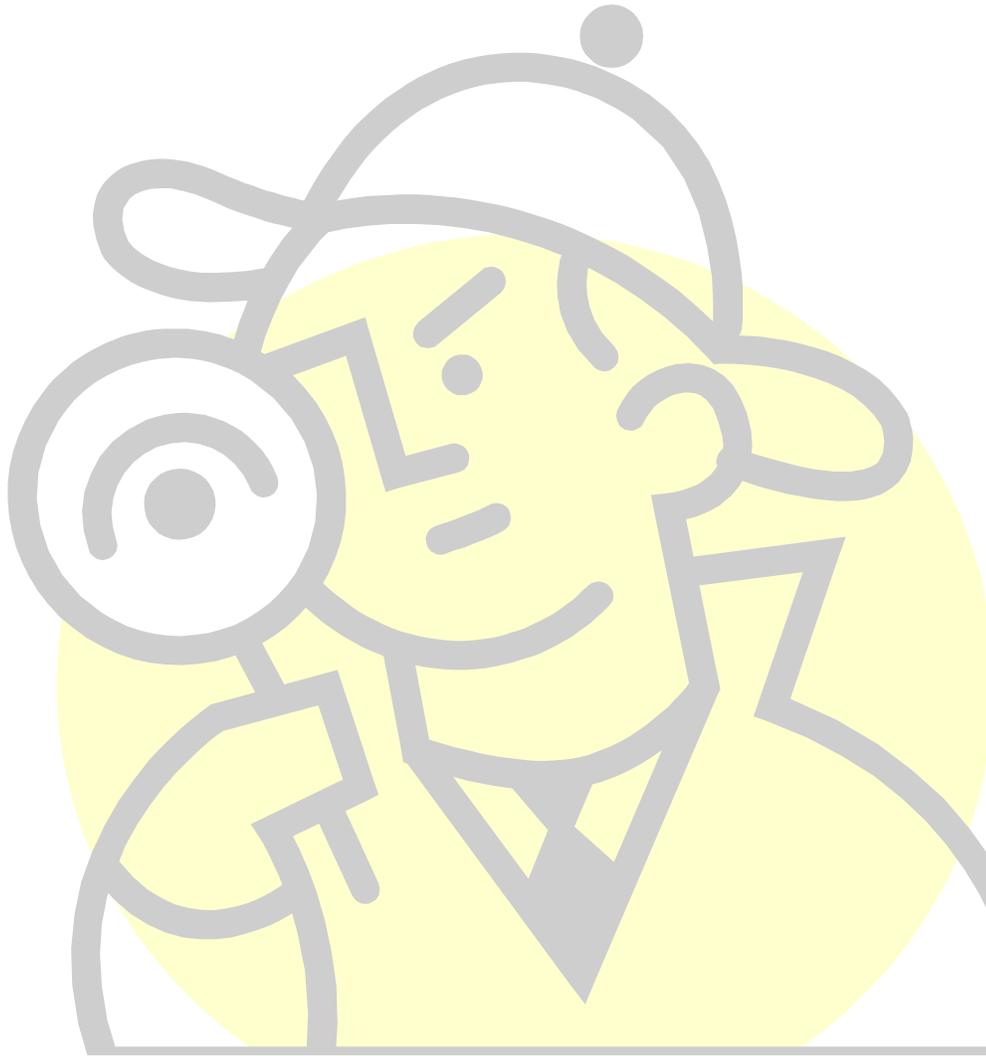
**Source #3:**



## Research/Source Log

**Source #4**

**Source #5**



**Source #6**