

# Great Ideas For Teachers 2009

---

Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications  
Sponsored by the Community College Journalism Association, Small Programs Interest Group,  
Scholastic Journalism Division and Graduate Education Interest Group

**Prepared by Angie Chuang, Assistant Professor  
Journalism Division  
School of Communication, American University**

## Title

### **Every Intersection Has a Story**

Subtitle: How to engage students in the community outside the university bubble, allow them to develop their own journalistic story ideas, and help them overcome their reluctance to talk to strangers.

## Introduction

On the first day of my class called “Race, Ethnic and Community Reporting,” students draw an intersection of our city out of a hat. I have pre-chosen and pre-screened the intersections with three criteria in mind: 1) They are not in areas near the university or frequented by students; 2) They are more racially, ethnically and socioeconomically diverse than neighborhoods described by #1; 3) I have traveled to them ahead of time to make sure they have good fodder for journalistic stories and are reasonably safe.

Their assignment is simple: Go to the intersection at least three times over the next three weeks to find and report a story, any story, that reflects the larger community around it. Use the cross streets as a starting point, but wander as far as you need – within reason – to get a sense of the neighborhood and find a good story. The story can be about a community gathering place or business, a profile of someone who reflects that area, a news / trend piece about an issue affecting the neighborhood.

## Rationale

Many universities, particularly urban campuses, struggle to foster more student engagement with the surrounding community. In addition, academia and the ever-changing journalism industry have placed increasing emphasis on experiential learning and “hyperlocal” reporting, respectively. This exercise accomplishes all of the above, while creating a situation in which reporting students are forced to employ crucial journalism and life skills: Finding their bearings in an unfamiliar setting, and using their

critical thinking skills to develop a story idea from pure observation and in-person interviews (vs. press releases or the Web).

### **Implementation**

- After having students draw their intersections, I discuss a set of “Navigating Unfamiliar Territory” guidelines such as: 1) Do research on the neighborhood ahead of time, such as demographics, and local issues about which mainstream media have written. 2) Find a “community guide,” in the form of a local activist or leader, if you are anxious about getting started. 3) If you encounter a language barrier in an immigrant community, don’t give up. Look for a younger person, e.g. a teenage child, who might serve as an impromptu interpreter.
- For the first week, students just go to their intersections; I encourage them to observe and ask questions without doing too much official reporting yet. When they return, I do an in-class exercise to help them identify the key themes in the neighborhood, and the people, places, or issues to best illustrate them.
- They write a “budget line” to pitch their stories to me, so I can give feedback and guidance on how to proceed. The stories are supposed to be a minimum of 500 words, but all the students who have done the exercise have exceeded that.

### **Impact**

The impact of this assignment, given on the first day of a popular and oversubscribed elective class, is quite dramatic. After drawing the intersections and learning of the assignment, about 10 percent of the students have dropped the class (average size 20) both times I have taught it. I want to send a message that doing community reporting and writing about race will require students to engage with the outside world in ways that may push them out of their comfort zones. If they’re unwilling to even try, I’d rather make room for students on the waiting list who are willing.

That said, I provide a great deal of support and encouragement to students who are game but timid. This past semester, a student broke down in tears during the first class because she had never taken the D.C. Metro (subway) system before and was scared to do so. I gave her a pep talk, offered to have another student accompany her, and she went to her intersection the next day. A week later, she thanked me, because a few days after that experience she rode the Metro to Barack Obama’s Inauguration, something she would not have attended otherwise.

The stories students have produced from their intersections have been varied and rich: Community activists transform a movie theater destroyed during the 1968 riots following Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination into a neighborhood venue for live theater and dance, sparking an emerging arts-based community in a formerly gutted neighborhood. A Catholic church in a historic African American neighborhood evolves with changing demographics to offer Spanish-language services for Salvadoran immigrants. A

downtown Y provides weightlifting classes and job training for formerly homeless women entering the construction industry.

<b>Poster Display Ideas</b>
-----------------------------

Stories and photos from the Intersection assignments were displayed on a class Web site with a Google interactive map:

<http://dccommunityreporting.americanobserver.net/2008/05/25/intersections/>

In addition, some M.A. students produced panoramic Flash-based photography of the intersections. If these could not be displayed electronically, I could produce a poster of the Google interactive map, which would very clearly illustrate where the intersections were and the stories that resulted from them. Also, I could create a poster highlighting the key points of my “Navigating Unfamiliar Territory” tips (a handout that I go over with students on the first day).