

NIONE MEAKIN describes how her spontaneous decision to write about an impromptu 'sit in' by a group of women on the train to her first job interview helped to secure her future career in journalism



The many duties of a journalist

Getting into journalism is widely acknowledged as a tricky business. It can mean interminable weeks spent on your local paper, writing the column that none of the staff wants to write and none of the readership reads. Or making more cups of coffee than a Starbucks employee. Or pestering an editor until he takes out a restraining order against you. For me, it meant getting stranded on a train in an unfamiliar part of the country armed only with a notebook and pen.

First interview

I was 20 and coming to the end of a six-month newspaper journalism course at

Highbury College, Portsmouth, when I got my first job interview for a position as a trainee reporter at a weekly paper in Great Malvern, Worcestershire. On the way there, I spotted a potential story when a gaggle of women decided to hold an impromptu "sit-in" in response to the driver's announcement that the train was to terminate early. They were not getting off, they informed the carriage, until it arrived at its scheduled destination.

I picked up my notebook and biro and barged down the train to interview them, leaving my bag with my then-boyfriend.

As I was smugly imagining the brownie points to be gained by presenting a story to my interviewer, I realised, five seconds too late, that the train had stopped at the

station I needed to get off at and was now pulling away. My boyfriend was standing on the platform, gesturing frantically and holding my bag.

After waiting nearly an hour for a train back, I arrived at the newspaper offices, sweating profusely and clutching a hastily-scribbled news story. Fortunately, it turned out the editor wasn't too bothered how sweaty his reporters were, as long as they brought in good stories. I was offered the job and the article went on that week's front page. I was in.

New career

Having packed my bags and said goodbye to the friends I'd made in Portsmouth, I headed to Malvern, to begin my new career. With shorthand, media law and government exams under my belt, as well as several weeks of work experience, I considered myself fairly well-equipped. Turned out I still had a lot to learn.

My first day was spent writing, and largely rewriting, stories and learning the essential journalistic skill of holding a phone between shoulder and ear, while simultaneously talking and taking shorthand notes. As you get more experienced, you learn how to do all this while also drinking a cup of coffee.

In the evening, I was dispatched to a village clearly unknown to Ordnance Survey to cover a parish council meeting, where I took down page after page of notes on planning applications,

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village fete funding bids and residents' complaints about noisy lawnmowers.

It was far from the fast-paced glamour often associated with journalism, but, as I learned, it was what provides local papers with their "bread and butter". It was a relief to find there was more exotic cuisine on the menu. A call had come in letting us know that the air ambulance was out on the Malvern Hills after a walker had fallen. I was bundled out of the office with a photographer to find out what was going on.

Trying to sensitively get all the facts, take notes and stay clear of people carrying out vital medical procedures was an experience that couldn't be taught in college. Even things we had been taught, such as challenging court reporting restrictions, were none the less harder than I had imagined. Sitting on the Press bench, I frantically mugged up with my copy of McNae's Essential Law for Journalists, before making a shaky speech to magistrates in the hope of convincing



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them to let us identify a 16-year-old who had breached an antisocial behaviour order. They refused, but at least, I thought, I'd done it.

Your first "death-knock" is a journalistic milestone. Mine followed an inquest I had attended into the death of a local toddler who had died a few days previously. On returning to the office, I was sent to interview his parents. Feeling queasy, I knocked on the door.

Thank-you note

I came out an hour later, feeling immensely sad, but relieved. Instead of resenting my presence, his parents had been desperate to talk about him and share their memories. I came away with a front-page story that I felt went some way to summing up his short life. Shortly after it was published, a huge bunch of flowers arrived at the office, with a note thanking me for the piece.

The next week, I was in Bromley, interviewing actors, knocking back free wine and pocketing the hotel's

complementary toiletries on an all-expenses-paid theatre press trip. Journalism is nothing if not diverse.

In April, after nearly two years on the paper, I sat my National Certificate Examination (NCE), which marks the end of a trainee's apprenticeship.

I found it infinitely easier than the initial government and law exams I had sat at college, as it is less academic and more about reporting ability. I was also fortunate as I had been sent on two workshops previously, where we were given practice exam papers and a taste of how the interview and speech modules would work. So when the day arrived, I was well prepared. I now hope to move to a bigger, daily paper where I can build on the skills I've learned. Eventually I might even move to a national title. With journalism you never know what's round the corner.

For information on other NCTJ-accredited journalism courses, contact the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) on 01279 430009.