

Experience is the Best Teacher: Getting hands-on

Go to the morgue. The Free Press' Jack Kresnak organizes a trip to the local morgue for the paper's high school apprentices and interns. There are many reasons to do it, Kresnak said: to understand the inner workings of the institution, to learn the jargon and the science. But the experience goes beyond the technical. "The reason I do it is to show that this is not in the abstract, that there are real human beings affected by events we have to cover," Kresnak said. "Here at the morgue, they are learning what they can from the remains, but they treat them with the utmost respect, even as they're cutting them open... These are human beings here... and they deserve to be treated with dignity."

Shadow. "One of the best ways to [learn] is to find a sort of interesting case and ... shadow the court reporter for a week, and try to get the lay of the land and get introduced to some folks... and then take a couple of afternoons where [you're] actually covering the story," Wichita Eagle crime & courts team leader L. Kelly said. "Then the regular court reporter can come back and start writing."

Spend time on a ride-along. "Nothing will earn you more street cred more quickly than to spend a shift with a cop and to see how policing is done on the street level," said former reporter and current public information officer for the Clearwater, Fla. police department, Wayne Shelor. "Nothing will earn a crime reporter validity with the cops quicker than spending shifts - plural. Spend eight hours, spend a ten-hour shift. And do it again on the weekend."

Go to the police academy. Spend time with recruits. Go through a session of training with them. Get to understand what their job entails. And, if your local police department offers it, attend a citizens' police academy to learn even more about the job and its work with the public.

Knock on doors. Practice shoe-leather journalism. Talk to neighbors and don't be afraid to get a few doors slammed in your face. It's not personal."