

## Finding Cool Ideas – Step by Step By Rhea Wessel

### Step 1: Use high-quality publications and general search terms

When doing desk research, I tend to gravitate to high-quality general publications as a starting place, and then I narrow into specialty publications and trade magazines.

Once I was asked to come up with story ideas related **to water problems in India.**

I started with a basic keyword search in Scientific American when I began the assignment.

I found this article:

**SCIENTIFIC  
AMERICAN™**

### **"Water Poor" Will Suffer Most as Climate Change Hits Cities**

A report recommends that all levels of government invest in water infrastructure to prevent wastage and expand the delivery of treated water to poor communities

Dec 5, 2011 | By Julia Pyper

Indore is the fastest-growing city in the central state of Madhya Pradesh, India. The industrial center has grown rapidly in the past 20 years, reaching a population of nearly 3.3 million people. But as the city grows in numbers, its **water supply** becomes increasingly insecure.



I found some interesting ideas and came across new keywords that I searched in another step. These include: "water threats," "water poor," and "over-tapping groundwater."

To keep track of my work - and to make it easier to share with team members - I keep lists of searches already performed, publications already searched, and searches that I still need to do. My lists can look like this:

<u>Keywords already searched</u>	
	"water threats" "water poor"
<u>To Search</u>	
	"climate change" and "water levels"  Over-tapping groundwater Overexploitation  "fetch water" Water hygiene Water and privatization Land tenure rights

## **Step 2: Look in the wrong spot for new ideas**

As I peruse material, I intentionally look in the "wrong" publication for my research subject. In other words, I look in magazines of high-quality apart from the usual suspects.

For instance, I searched Wired on the hunch that two hot topics might be linked: "big data" and "water." Hmmm, sure enough...

I found this article:

  
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Two initiatives are part of a wider program at Intel to apply Big Data to a range of specific problems. Its short-term goal is to drive research insights, while the long-term aim is creating reference architectures that can apply across a variety of industries and drive value.

Likewise, I wanted to know what was in Foreign Affairs related to water infrastructure.

I found this article:



The image is a screenshot of a Foreign Affairs article. At the top left is the Foreign Affairs logo, which features a circular emblem with a horse and rider. To the right of the logo, the words "FOREIGN AFFAIRS" are written in a large, bold, serif font. Below the logo and title, there is a red button labeled "Subscribe" and a link to "Snapshots". The main title of the article is "Suicide By Drought" in a large, bold, serif font. Below the title is the subtitle "How China is Destroying Its Own Water Supply" in a smaller, sans-serif font. The author's name, "By Sulmaan Khan", is on the left, and the date, "JULY 18, 2014", is on the right. The main image of the article shows a vast, arid landscape with sand dunes in the foreground and sparse, dry vegetation in the distance under a clear sky.

The Foreign Affairs article "Suicide by Drought" got me thinking about a mammal called the pika that burrows through the ground leaving holes that capture water and prevent soil erosion. The article says they were exterminated in mass in China, and this led to falling water levels.

I might not be able to tie this back to challenges in India, but I've now found something interesting for sure, and I've learned about how China's rapid economic growth has led to haphazard water infrastructure. I will save the anecdote about pikas in China as an idea for a nice lead for a story.

### **Step 3: Mind map your ideas based on your fresh inspiration. Begin filling out a Story Plan.**

Next I might mind map the topic or begin filling out a Story Plan. I did a bit more general searching on "challenges and water infrastructure" and quickly scribbled the below mind map, which I later put into PowerPoint:



Here you'll see terms as diverse as regulation, corruption and political unrest.

In the brainstorming phase, one shouldn't hold back. This is where the wild ideas belong.

I personally find it easier to do these by hand with pen and paper than to use an app.

## Step 4: Capture ideas for later. Capture visual material

Another thing I do is capture what grabs my eye so that I may be able to use it in one way or another down the road.

I try to collect my materials and store them in a way that makes it easy to return after a break and remember where I left off. A Story Plan is a great place to do that.

If I find a telling statistic, I've got a place to keep that; if someone's ideas and writings catch my eye, I have a place to write down the name as a possible interview partner.

Also, I realize that for social media, it always needs to be visual. I happened across the two slides below. The first has an interesting quote. The second could inspire new visuals.



**"Every one of my budgets was largely a gamble on rain."  
Finance Minister of  
Government of India**

### Rivers are political systems....

- Management of rivers is political; management of international rivers is very political...
- Rivals... dwellers on opposite banks of a river
- The Chinese got it right long ago:



river + dyke = Political order