First Things First

Your college career is drawing to a close and it’s almost time to take your first big step into the professional world of news!

Excited, scared and a little unsure exactly how all this works? You’re not alone! This guide will walk you through everything you need to know about finding your first news job, with advice from experienced reporters (who have job hunted many times) and from News Directors (your future bosses).

Let’s get you hired!

When to start looking

The hiring process for any given opening often moves quickly. News Directors want to fill positions as soon as possible and are usually looking for someone who can start right away.

At the same time, it can take months and dozens of applications to find a good fit and get an offer for your first job.

Aim to begin applying at least one or two months before your earliest start date. May graduates, March and April are good times to begin applying for posted openings. While a News Director may not be able to hire you for an immediate opening, with a strong application package, you’ll be top of mind when you apply for the next opening.

Where to look for news jobs

The online RTDNA Career Center includes News Directors’ postings of both entry-level and experienced broadcast news jobs.

Station group websites are often the most up-to-date source for current openings, and many have application portals to submit your materials to one or more openings.

Job fairs (like the Excellence in Journalism J-Expo) are great places to make a memorable impression on hiring managers or even get hired on the
spot. Check your local journalism associations and j-schools, many of which host spring job fairs.

**TV Jobs** is a subscription service with a job and resume bank for local broadcast news jobs.

LinkedIn is an often overlooked place to connect individually with hiring managers and, along with other social media sites including Twitter and Facebook (especially Groups for news professionals) is a good place to make a first impression on potential future bosses. Those personal connections are key in ensuring your application gets a thorough look.

### Picking a market

If you’re like many talented future Murrow Award winners and household name journalists, you know where you want your career to take you: Your hometown station. A major market anchor desk. Network news. Setting goals is key, but when searching for your first job, it’s important to cast a wide net. Don’t rule out smaller market stations, off-air newsroom jobs or non-traditional news outlets. Broadcasting is a competitive business and there’s a fine line between aiming high and aiming unrealistically. With your first job, it’s all about getting your foot in the door and gaining the experience to get closer to your dream job. It’s also a chance to push yourself out of your comfort zone. Small market or non-traditional jobs might seem less prestigious, or may not be in the place where you want to spend the rest of your life, but they often offer the best opportunities for taking on more responsibility and expanding your skills.

**TOP TIP**

**Professionalize your social media.** Even if you do not plan to use social media to job hunt, know that hiring managers WILL look at all your profiles across multiple platforms. Prior to sending out any applications, ensure your social media posts and pictures are professional.

**TOP TIP**

**Identify stations and cities where you want to work.** Become an expert on the places that you are interested in. Make connections with those stations. Fly out to those cities. Try to arrange meetings with news directors in the markets you like. Plan trips that can allow you to gain exposure to local cultures. Look for the news teams and the areas that will allow you to become the kind of journalist that you want to be and to cover the stories that you are interested in. This approach will prepare you for when opportunity strikes. - Stephanie Bertini

RTDNA.org
Stephanie Bertini, Reporter

Crafting a demo reel can be a daunting task, especially if you’re doing it for the first time. Landing an interview might seem impossible, particularly if you have no professional experience working on-air.

Here’s what you need to know about crafting your reel and securing interviews as you weave your way through your television news job search.

Start your demo reel with a quick montage. It should run anywhere from 30 to 60 seconds and showcase all of your assets as a talent. You should look camera-ready, with neat hair, full make-up and sharp clothing. Select video clips where you are performing at your highest potential. Include interactive and engaging stand-ups. You need to make a good first impression. Most news directors will decide if they are interested very quickly. Grab their attention!

Select three strong stories for your reel. These reports should be written well, shot well, and edited well. Your on-camera performance and your track should be solid. The stories should each run about 1 minute and 30 seconds, give or take 15 seconds. It is best to take this as an opportunity to showcase your versatility. Start with a hard news story. You can follow that with an issue-based story, and then maybe a feature report. There are no
firm rules when it comes to story selection but you generally should show that you can cover a variety of stories and that your skills meet or exceed industry standards. The better the stories, the better chance you have at keeping news directors’ attention. You want them to keep watching!

**Ultimately, the purpose of the demo reel is to get you an interview.** Therefore every piece of video you select for that reel should be chosen with that goal in mind. Overall, news directors are busy. You don’t want to waste their time. When deciding what to put on your reel, you should think: short, powerful and memorable. At the end of the reel, you can edit in a black slate with your name and your contact information. Keep it up for about 15 to 20 seconds.

So remember:

1.) First impressions are crucial.

2.) The content is what matters most.

3.) The purpose of a demo reel is to get you an interview.

Follow this formula:

**Montage (30 to 60 seconds) + 3 Stories (about 90 seconds each) + Slate with your name and contact information (15 to 20 seconds)**

A solid demo reel is the most important thing required for a job search in television news.
Brandon Mercer, RTDNA Region 2 Director

Make your resume a brochure about how you will help the company you’re applying with.

**There is no “rule” about length.** Have clear headers, but don’t be afraid to list lots of skills, accomplishments and experiences. The first page is still the most important, but don’t leave off something that a hiring manager may want to read. In the headings for each job, share what you accomplished, ideally in an empirical manner: “Produced a seven-part series on the wildfire season that included companion website content that was the third most-read on the site that week. Minute-by-minute ratings show the stories held audience through the first 5 minutes of the segment.”

**Use resume keywords** that align with those in the job description. This works organically of course but more importantly, most companies use AI to review resume submissions and match them to job listings. The more keyword matches, the more likely the computer surfaces your resume. This is especially important for on-air jobs where dozens of applicants will send in online resumes.

**Proofread, proofread; proofread.** I once had a typo on a resume I sent to 35 newsrooms. Have two other people (who know grammar) proofread it for both style and typos. Did you catch the typo in this bullet point? Proofread!

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**TOP TIP**

*Create a strong and concise resume.* Your resume should be short and simple. It should include all of your media-related qualifications, as well as your media-related skills, industry awards and/or achievements. Highlight any different languages you speak, different countries you have traveled to and your community involvement or volunteer work. If your only experience with media is through school, that is just fine. Overall, the idea is to showcase that you have a background in communications. - **Stephanie Bertini**
Talk to your references before listing them. And do list them. Don’t say “references upon request.” That just seems elitist or wrongheaded.

Do include some items about your personality and interests. Companies don’t just hire someone to do the job. They hire a teammate and a future friend for co-workers. Share enough to show your personality and your other interests. This can be especially useful if you’re a journalist who also teaches videography at a college, for example. That would show you have multiple skills and are respected for them. It can also be useful if you share things like “Hobbies include photography, astronomy, and backpacking.” It shows you probably know the outdoors, can cover space, and know how to use a camera. Be selective, but do share some items that make you seem more like a real person. Share your beats and favorite coverages areas too, so hiring managers have a sense of how you can complete their team’s skillsets.

Don’t go overboard on colors or layouts. Computers often parse your resume into a text-based list anyway.

Words of Wisdom

“Just get in the door! Accept the position that's available. Master it, then volunteer like crazy in newsroom. Ask reporters and anchors to mentor you.” – Shon G., Anchor

“This industry is so small. Never burn a bridge.” – Shawn R., Programming Director

“Practice your craft and take constructive criticism seriously. The goal is to continually get better. Don’t cheat yourself looking for shortcuts!” – Jay G., Educator

“Embrace the adventure! Don’t limit yourself to markets close to home, part of the excitement and fun of news is exploring the country and making great friends along the way.” – Elizabeth E., former Reporter
Adapted from Forrest Carr for RTDNA

Every news director is different, so my answer to that question will be personal. Some things are universal; all news directors look for basic talent and craft skills. I also seek a sense of passion, hoping to separate the nice people who just want to be on TV from those who see it as a calling. Job applications demonstrating the latter are the ones that get my attention the fastest.

Showcasing is the key. Buzzwords and phrases telegraphing “passion,” “a proven track record of success,” “an award-winning journalist,” and so on have become so common as to mean nothing. The key is not to tell me that you have a fire in the belly to make a difference, but to show it.

The first opportunity to do this is the cover letter. To be frank, most candidates waste their cover letters, filling them with language assuring me they’re the best candidate and saying how much they’d love to move to my city, how they always wanted to be a journalist, how they’re ready for the next step, etc. None of this means anything.

TOP TIP

Research the market and reflect that in your cover letter. It is industry standard for resumes and cover letters to accompany a demo reel. You should never send out a standard cover letter. Rather, you should write a new cover letter for each job you apply to, and that letter should illustrate that you have an understanding of the particular news market. - Stephanie Bertini
So what does? Here’s a fictional example.

Dear XXXXX,

When I was a kid my best friend, who lived two doors down, lost both parents in a car crash on New Year’s Eve. The driver who killed them was drunk. Relatives came and took away my friend, whom I never saw again. I was three and a half. This was my first inkling in life that all was not always right with the world. I was, of course, at the time helpless to do anything about it. But I never forgot it.

In high school, some of my classmates died in a wreck. Once again, alcohol was involved. This time, I was in a position to do something. I wrote a three-part series on the issue for my school newspaper. The incident and the follow-up stories inspired a school rally on the problem of teen drinking and driving. I can’t say for sure whether this saved lives. I hope it did. But what the coverage and rally definitely did do was to impress on me the power of the written and spoken word to bring people together. The experience inspired me to go into journalism.

Last month I got another reminder of the power and purpose of our profession. I took a call from a single mom with two young children who was facing eviction because her ex-husband was behind on his child support. With the encouragement of station management, I aired a series of reports. At first, state bureaucrats did not want to talk. I was persistent. Several things happened. One, viewers and a local charity stepped forward with cash assistance, which prevented the eviction. Second, the state finally did swing into action, locating the deadbeat dad and taking the enforcement steps necessary to get the payments flowing again. And third, a local state legislator proposed a new law to beef up enforcement resources, a lack of which had led to this case slipping through the cracks in the first place. A sample of my coverage is included on my video link.

Do you see what happened there? The candidate didn’t have to tell me she was a focused, passionate, effective journalist. She showed me. So at this point I’m on the verge of being impressed.

The letter continues:

I’m particularly interested in your newsroom because you have built a reputation for covering the same kinds of stories that drive me and that I know how to do. Your station slogan and marketing position showcase an investigative style. The content of your website backs this up. And I noticed that last year you won an Edward R. Murrow award for investigative reporting in your region and also a national Murrow for best website. This is exactly the kind of station I’m seeking for my next employer. I believe my job skills and interests will fit very well with team you have developed.

Okay, now you can officially color me impressed. An excellent cover letter
and demo reel will not guarantee a job, but they will move you ahead in line—sometimes, way ahead. If you are a competitive journalist, you’ll have a good story to tell. It won’t hurt to tell it, and it might hurt not to.

**RESUME & COVER LETTER DON’TS**
Before submitting any application, don’t forget to:

1. Include the attachments.
2. Double check your document names and ensure they’re labeled with your first and last name.
3. Ensure you’re using the correct News Director and station name.
4. Remove anything that doesn’t highlight how you’re a fit for the position.
5. Confirm all links are correct.

Find more examples of application mistakes to avoid [here](#) and [here](#).

**Words of Wisdom**

“What you don’t know is the most dangerous for the first step of your career. Also, and maybe more importantly, learn the business side of TV.” – Tim K., Asst. ND

“Be accurate, be fair, be first (in that order).” – Daniel C. Producer

“Do your best every day. Don’t look too far down the road. Focus on the present. Have a good attitude. Be nice to everyone. LEARN AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE.” – Chris S., Anchor

“Don’t be discouraged by market size. The worst thing a station can ever say is no.” – James W., Producer

“Find a hobby and friends outside of work...so you can have an escape during those stressful times. Always do your best work...no matter the story.” – Anthony A., Anchor
Pursuing an on-air career can be tough. Television news is a competitive, and selective business. When you’re just starting out, your lack of experience can leave you feeling intimidated. Networking and/or hiring an agent can help. Networking is crucial to success in this business. The more people you know, the more opportunities you have to learn, to grow, and to get hired. But networking can be hard especially when you’re new to your career. Here are some tips:

**Approach Networking Genuinely:** Seek out people who can help you advance in your career based on their merits. Understand who they are professionally. What is their brand? What have they achieved? What are they good at? What stories do they cover? Approach them with questions and genuine interest.

**Attend Industry Conferences:** I met my first news director and my second news director at RTDNA conferences. Surrounding yourself with people in the industry and meeting people in management positions can really help you catch the break you need.

**Invest in Professional Development:** Your degree is not enough! The best journalists are always learning. So, attend the Poynter Institute, register for an IRE workshop or look for other ways to invest in your professional development. Engaging with other journalists will help you build a list of contacts who share your passion, and earning the respect of your peers will pay off. The industry is small. Someday someone you connect with may recommend you for a job or become a news manager in a position to hire you.
Find Honest Mentors: Dedicated journalists are constantly working on their craft. Find and hold onto industry professionals who are willing to provide honest feedback and constructive criticism. The best mentors do not just compliment you. They focus on what you need to improve. They are committed to helping you get better.

Do you need an agent?

An agent has the potential to help you advance your career. However, the wrong agent can do the opposite. Here are some questions that you may want to ask yourself before signing with an agent.

Is it Necessary? An agent can be very helpful during complicated contract negotiations. If there are certain things that you absolutely want in your professional life then an agent might be important.

Does it Make Financial Sense? When you sign with an agent you have committed to paying the agent a percentage of your salary, and so you need to make a big enough salary for that commitment to make sense financially. For this reason, agents are not typically involved until a reporter’s second or third job search when bigger contracts are on the table.

Is This Agent a Good Fit for Me? Do not make the mistake of signing with the first agent who approaches you or the first agent who calls you back. Working with the wrong agent can be damaging to your career and your morale. Choose wisely. Make sure you communicate your needs and expectations. Make sure you understand and are comfortable with how that agent works.

Am I willing to invest to do this right? You will have to sign a contract. You should have a lawyer look over that contract before you sign it. Never sign anything with an agent unless you totally and absolutely understand it.

TOP TIP
Build connections long before a job is posted. Industry conferences, informational interviews, and asking news directors for feedback on your stories are just a few of the many ways you can get yourself ahead. Aim to position yourself as a candidate for a future job posting rather than simply applying to jobs as they are posted. - Stephanie Bertini
I have the privilege of talking to job candidates every week. While it takes a lot of time to find the great in a large pool of good or average, it’s a fun part of the job. Finding the perfect journalist to fill a slot on a team is a great joy. But what makes a journalist a more likely hire for me? Here’s what I’m looking for:

**Meet the needs:** Nothing else matters if you don’t have the skills and experience I need for this position. If our ad says 2-5 years required, and you have only one, it becomes almost impossible for me to hire you. Those specifications are there for a reason. If our ad says 2-5 years preferred, then there’s some leeway. Further, can you prove that you can do the work for which we require that experience? You need to.

**Google the station; Google me:** Spend a few moments researching the outlet you’re hoping to join. It’s not hard to Google call letters or a news director’s name. That doesn’t mean you should outright patronize either the station or the news director with pointless recitations of things we already know, but where you find something in common or a relevant story from your own past, throw it in to your cover letter or as part of your opening chit-chat during the interview.

**Be interesting; be exceptional:** Surely you know of at least one thing about you that’s interesting to other people. Or something that makes you stand out from others. Preferably this thing of interest is in your journalism career, but if you’re just starting out, perhaps it’s something from your other pursuits (education, athletics, arts, etc.) Tell me what makes you special. If you were a President’s Scholar, or a state champion, or a team captain, highlight that.

**Tell me a story:** In our interview, I’ll ask about some things from your past. Make it in a great story; make me care. If you can’t do this for your own
stories, I bet you’re not very good about doing this for other people’s stories.

**Be ready to work**: Whether you see my newsroom as your dream job or a stepping stone, be ready to run every day. This job’s too hard not to have fun doing it. If you’re not having fun, maybe you’re in the wrong place.

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<th>Words of Wisdom</th>
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<tr>
<td>“Be known as the hardest worker in your newsroom, not the know-it-all.” – Beth M, Anchor</td>
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<td>“Learn everything. Be a sponge. Read/watch things you might not agree with. Be skeptical, not cynical. Don't be afraid to ask for help.” – Adam S., Executive Producer</td>
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<td>“Choose to love your small market. It’s not just a stepping stone. The viewers there deserve your best work.” – Jeremy K., Former Reporter/Producer</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Be yourself. No one will take you seriously if you aren’t genuine.” – Steve S., Anchor</td>
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How many times have you read advice for landing the right job? You can search websites, follow blogs, print articles, download guides like this—heck you can even hire people who call themselves “gurus.”

But how often do you look for advice on choosing the right job, especially when it’s your first?

Do you think you have to take the first job you interview for? Maybe, but while you want to get your foot in the door, you need to make sure it doesn’t get pinched in the process by taking a job in a poor environment.

So first things first.

**Be a journalist: Ask questions.**

You’re interviewing to be a journalist, so be one during your interview process. Vet the newsroom just as they are vetting you to join their team. Find a company that embraces your value system and sets you up for success. Every question you ask the News Director should also be asked of the staff. If the ND tells you they have a culture built on open door policies, constructive criticism, positive reinforcement, and promotion from within, be sure to see if that sentiment is echoed by the staff. If management tells you their philosophy for how a difficult situation is handled (for example—an MMJ in a risky, night time situation), ask the MMJs and assignment desk how those are handled. Probe management and staff alike. You’re looking for consistent answers that dovetail with the environment you’re looking to enter and are in alignment with your value system.

**Work smartly, work safely**

Ensure that your safety is in your hands. Yes, the station has to be proactive with regard to field safety, including having policies and
procedures in place to protect you and your coworkers, but the final decision in any particular circumstance must be yours. Ask the management team what is expected when you find yourself in a dangerous situation, and who can make that decision? Again, test the answer with photogs, MMJs, and reporters to be sure you’re comfortable with the station’s position. I always tell my crews that they have to make the call and then tell me what it is. Live truck operators & photographers make the call as to lightning and safety of ENG trucks and you should make the call as to your safety.

**Feedback, silence or worse?**

Be sure to inquire about management’s feedback philosophy. Seek a newsroom where critiques, constructive feedback and positive reinforcement are the norm, not criticism and degradation. You want to work in a newsroom that will push you, encourage you and teach you. Even if you’ve been in this business for a decade or more, there is always room to learn. Make sure you find a place that encourages collaboration, sharing, and valuable feedback.

**Negotiating: When you get an offer**

*What to expect*

RTDNA conducts an annual survey of local radio and television news salaries, and the 2019 survey (conducted in October through December 2018) shows that typical starting salaries in local TV News are around $28,000 to $30,500. Annual starting salaries do vary by position. News Producers and Assignment Editors, for example, tend to earn a little more than new multi-media journalists, the most common position for new employees with no prior fulltime experience in news.

In radio, starting salaries were typically between $30,100 and $31,900, or a little higher for radio news reporters. Starting pay in radio was between $100 and $3,300 higher than the year before.

Get more detailed breakdowns of starting pay by position, as well as median and average pay by market size and newsroom size, in our latest salary report.
Can I ask for more?

For reporter gigs, the answer to that question is the same for both: The salary offer usually will pretty firm. There might be more wiggle room for certain other kinds of issues—for example, length of commitment, the need to take time off for an upcoming wedding and so on. That said, management negotiation styles do differ from place to place, and it never hurts to make a reasonable counter offer. In any case, I would never advise anyone to take a job at a salary they can’t live with. But on the other hand, usually at this level for candidates money is not the primary issue. Working conditions and career opportunity are. - Forrest Carr

For tips and practice negotiating an offer, check out the AAUW Work Smart and Start Smart online programs.

**TOP TIP**

*Live where you work.* Work in the newsroom, live in the community. When you find the right fit, you’re going to make friends in the newsroom. After all, if you’ve vetted the culture, you’re going to be working long hours alongside like-minded individuals. However, remember to live in the community and not in your newsroom bubble. Branch out and enlarge your social circle beyond your coworkers. By living in the community whose stories you tell, you’ll gain keen insights, valuable ideas and sources and learn what is really important to the people you serve. When you’re a part of your new community, your stories will be more authentic and will connect directly with your target audience—your neighbors. – Allison McGinley

**Words of Wisdom**

“Network, network, network. You can't have too many contacts. You can learn from them, and they may help you get a job.” -Joe M., Producer

“Fight for better pay in your first job. If you don’t, you're setting yourself up to be underpaid your entire career.” -Alex R., Reporter

“Do good work and work hard. Hard work will get you where you want to go..” -Eric E., Assist. News Director
What’s next

Your first day on the job is not the finish line – it’s your first day learning how to survive and thrive in a working newsroom.

Classroom work and internships have helped you build the basic skills you need to report the news, but in your new job, you’ll be doing so in a fast-paced, deadline-based environment. You’ll likely be pitching, writing, shooting and editing your own stories. Being on TV may be a small portion of your day compared to the behind-the-scenes work writing VOSOT scripts, web stories and social media posts.

Mistakes in your finished product no longer mean docked points, but public corrections.

Professor Simon Perez asks graduates every year about their experiences in new jobs. Here’s what the new multimedia journalists say:

- One of the biggest new job challenges is finding story ideas and ensuring you can follow through every day.

- Lining up interviews is easier as a professional than as a student.

- You’ll be covering more intense real-world stories as a professional than as a student.

- Professional perks including equipment and news vehicles make it easier to get to stories and finish them in the field.

- You’ll need to be able to deliver informative, conversational live shots regularly without reading from a detailed script.

TOP TIP

Get to work & work hard. After you find your best fit (note I didn’t say “perfect”) newsroom, be prepared to work hard. Many of the best newsrooms work the hardest and have the highest expectations and standards, but also provide the tools to achieve and succeed. Find a home that gives you the chance to grow, teaches you what you need to know and won’t let you slack off. A newsroom like this will make you a better journalist and person. – Allison McGinley

LEARN MORE

Improve your on air delivery with regular tips from the RTDNA News Coach.
Your first job is just your first step! RTDNA membership offers opportunities to learn, lead and grow your career.

**Use Code 1STJOB**

to get $20 off your RTDNA New Professional membership.

*Recent graduates are eligible for up to two years after college graduation.*

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**Words of Wisdom**

“Don’t be a jerk, especially in your first market. This business is super small, so a bad reputation will sink your career before it begins.” -Dan S., Photojournalist

“If somebody wants to teach you something, be willing to learn! The more you know how to do, the more valuable you are.” -Anna I., Newscast Producer

“You'll work with people you love and people you can't stand. That translates to the people you encounter in your community.” -Aaron L., TV Reporter/Anchor

“If you’re willing to put in the effort, few occupations allow you the chance to actually make a difference in the community in which you live like being a journalist.” -Kevin U., Anchor/News Director