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## Computer-assisted reporting: **A crash course**

**Getting started costs less than ever. And it's no longer optional.** CAR pioneer Pat Stith at News and Observer in Raleigh, N.C., got a 486 computer in the early 1990s for \$10,500. Today you can snag a powerful computer 1,000 times more powerful for \$10,000 less.

**CAR can be a key in helping young journalists land jobs.** CAR levels the playing field between big and little news organizations. CAR helps journalists keep track of the three I's -- individuals, institutions and issues.

**CAR gives journalists the power to independently acquire and analyze information.** Many agencies have begun issuing data and reports only in electronic form, rather than on paper. Journalists without CAR are out of the loop.

We're expecting computers to do more than ever.

Journalists call upon computers to perform several general tasks, beyond routine word processing.

Here's a summary of what editors will expect you to do. This is a list of basic skills you should acquire, to aid you in the job hunt -- and on the job:

~ **Analyze numbers in a spreadsheet.** Great for budgets, sports statistics, political contributions. Skills to learn: Handle basic arithmetic -- sums, % change, sorting, calculating rates. Advantages: Easy to learn, easy to import info. Leading software: Excel.

~ **Analyze databases** (such as crime records). Text and numbers can be handled in database software. Powerful abilities to group and count. Skills to learn: How to group and count. Advantages: Provides best look at patterns such as why planes have crashed, where crimes have occurred. Also best for large records, and large numbers of records. Leading software: Access, FoxPro.

~ **Use online resources.** Available on the World Wide Web and through commercial vendors (Lexis/Nexis, Data Base Technologies people finder and many others). Skills to learn: How to use Internet search engines, how to download files to your hard drive, how to import files into spreadsheets and database managers, how to distinguish between what's legitimate -- and what's not -- on the Web.

## Getting mental

Tips on how to develop a computer-assisted journalism project focusing on your community:

~**Think.** Don't start out by thinking about databases and computers. Think about the big issues confronting your community. Think about the stories that ought to be told. The best stories focus on people, neighborhoods and specific addresses.

~**Pick topics.** Don't try to plan a whole project at this point. Let it emerge naturally from

your reporting.

~**Identify techniques.** Identify the reporting techniques you'll use. These might include traditional interviews, unusually large amounts of time spent in particular neighborhoods, investigative reporting, computer-assisted reporting, public-opinion polling and civic journalism methods such as town-hall meetings.

~**Boot up.** This is the point at which computers may begin playing a role in your reporting. In no case should use of a computer replace any of the other techniques.

~**Take a balanced approach.** Let each technique influence the others. For example, if traditional interviews show that people in a high-crime neighborhood feel relatively safe, ask residents and the computer why. The computer may help confirm that such impressions are rational; crime can be traced to a few specific addresses.

## Acquiring data

If you like haggling for a new car, you'll enjoy negotiating with government agencies. Here are tips for coming out a winner:

~ **Know the law.** Does the state or federal law make it clear whether the data you're requesting is public, and whether you're entitled to receive it in electronic form? Must the agency bear the burden of deleting confidential portions of a database prior to release?

~ **Know the data.** Never file a request blindly. Talk with workers at a variety of levels in the agency, and in the occupations that originally supply data to the agency, so that you understand what the database does -- and does not -- include.

~ **Know the nerd.** Track down the computer expert whose machines hold the data you desire. Find out, before filing your request, whether the data is easily copied; whether DVDs, CDs or diskettes are the best medium for handling the data; whether the data could be sent as an e-mail attachment; what formats the data may be copied into; whether there are any other databases you might be interested in.

~ **Know what you're getting.** In your discussions and formal request, specify which formats you can handle. Comma Separated Value (CSV) is a good universal format, but check your software to see what it can handle. Insist upon receiving a record layout, which tells you how each record is designed. It'll look something like:

Field name	Length	Type	Description
RECORDID	4	N	Unique # for each case.
CALLTYPE	16	C	Type of incident reported.
DATE	6	D	Date of incident.

### Web addresses with useful data and resources:

Investigative Reporters and Editors, [www.ire.org](http://www.ire.org). Student membership, \$25, is a bargain! bargain for stud

FirstGov, a gateway site for access to all federal sites, [www.firstgov.gov](http://www.firstgov.gov)

Census Bureau, tons of community data, [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)

Links to all Wisconsin state, county and local governments, schools, courts:

[www.wisconsin.gov](http://www.wisconsin.gov)

Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, state campaign-finance data, [www.wisdc.org](http://www.wisdc.org)

Center for Responsive Politics, federal campaign-finance data, [www.opensecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org)

City of Madison, [www.cityofmadison.com](http://www.cityofmadison.com)

Dane County, [www.co.dane.wi.us](http://www.co.dane.wi.us)

WI Dept. of Public Instruction, click data, select WINSS, [www.dpi.state.wi.us/](http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/)

Madison School District, [www.mmsd.org](http://www.mmsd.org)

Statistics Every Writer Should Know, along with valuable tips and links for journalists on all areas of coverage, <http://www.robertniles.com/stats/>

The Reporter's Desktop, a homepage for quick access to info, [www.reporter.org/desktop](http://www.reporter.org/desktop)