



COVERING A HURRICANE

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

getting the stories

Do your homework: Identify emergency officials and press contacts in the area you'll be covering. Call them before you leave if possible or once you get there. Make sure they have your contact information to notify you of news briefings, evacuations, shelter openings, etc. Many of the areas on the coast have been through this before and have procedures in place that can be helpful to you (such as e-mailing damage reports, which can help you figure out the worst-hit places so you know where to go for the best stories).

Access: Damaged areas often are closed to the general public, so you might need to hook up with emergency workers or police. If they aren't cooperative, try the Red Cross or utilities. They also have to visit damaged areas and often have more interesting stories.

Details: You'll be looking for details that bring the story home to readers. Look for heroes, rescuers, survivors, victims, surfers, people who rode out the storm. Check to see how well-known places fare, even if damage is reported to be minimal. If you're sent to Myrtle Beach and most of the damage is south of there, readers will still want to know how Pavilion rides fared.

Communication: Know who your editor contact is. He/she is your lifeline. Also know how to reach other reporters in the field. If you need help from someone here, please don't leave voicemail. Talk to a real person.

Expectations: Know what's expected of you. You'll be frustrated if you write a 20-inch story and the rewrite person was only expecting two grafs. Also, make sure the folks back home know where you are and who you're with, so they don't expect something not possible.

Filing/dealing with rewrite: Unless you're writing a specific sidebar, you're feeding quotes and information to the main rewrite person. You'll be one of many reporters filing copy, so keep it short. Be selective in which quotes you send. Look for distinctiveness. File early and often. It's OK to call something in every hour if that's what works for you. Don't spend a lot of time crafting paragraphs. Washburn's analogy: Your job is to mine gold. Let a jeweler who's safe, warm and dry back home turn it into a glittery bracelet.

Technology: Know how to use your equipment, test it before you leave, but be prepared for it not to work. Chances are you'll have to dictate.

Deadlines: Be sure to always ask your editor back in the office when they're going to need your stuff, and get it to them by then. Nothing's worse than having good, newsy information that doesn't get into the paper because you relayed it to an editor or rewrite person too late for them to use. And if you're getting amazing stuff late in the day, make sure they know so they can hold a spot for it.

helpful web sites:

National Hurricane Center
(<http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/>)
The official site for storm forecasts.

NOAA
(<http://hurricanes.noaa.gov/>)
Good background stuff on hurricanes, links to satellite images, readiness advice, etc.

Hurricanetrack.com
Website of Mark Sudduth, an amateur storm tracker who lives in eastern North Carolina and does a good job summarizing the latest reports. When a storm hits, he's usually on the road.

N.C. Emergency Management Division
(<http://www.nccrimecontrol.org/>; under divisions, pick EM): Includes link to phone numbers for each county emergency management coordinator.

N.C. roads information
(<http://apps.dot.state.nc.us/tims/>)
Info on closings, evacuations, etc.

S.C. Emergency Management
(<http://www.scemd.org/>)
Hurricane guide, public information, etc.



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survival guide

Before you leave: Make sure you have supplies you need. Don't assume you'll be able to buy toothpaste or deodorant if you forget it. Take a printout of phone numbers you might need and background of what other storms have done to your area.

Be safe: Don't put yourself in danger. NEVER drive through standing water, especially if you can't tell how deep it is. Most fatalities in hurricanes are on the highways. Also, if emergency personnel won't go into an area, that's probably a good indication that you shouldn't too.

Food: Keep some food in your vehicle, but opt for a hot meal instead of beanie-weenies whenever possible. In disasters, there's almost always a charity group or church feeding people if restaurants aren't open. Those are good places to make contact with people who can tell you stories, as well.

Energy: Major storms have three phases: preparation, the actual storm and cleanup. That generally means at least three days of working long hours, possibly more if the storm is bad. Try to sleep.

Gas: Keep your tank as full as possible. Gas stations often close for several days during a storm, and you'll be doing a lot of driving. If you see a station that's open and you're down to half a tank, fill up.

Hotels: There's usually one in each area that a storm is targeting that stays open for the media. Find it, and book a room in it for several days (if you just reserve one night, someone else might take it from you when the media hordes arrive). It's sometimes good to find a secondary hotel a little farther inland and book a room there, as well. On the Outer Banks, for instance, get a room in Nags Head and one in Manteo. You never know when one hotel will be damaged and you'll need a backup. Don't leave anything vital in your room when you're out reporting in case you have to change plans and can't go back for it.

Tires: Know how to change a tire. And ask the rental car company if they have any SUVs with more than one spare. Carry fix-a-flat.

packing checklist

Here's a good list of things you'll need:

- Mobile phone with a charger for your car
- Source list with phone numbers
- Bottled water
- Rubber boots or shoes
- Rain gear
- Non-perishable food that requires no cooking - peanut butter, crackers, energy bars, Cheetos, Pop-Tarts, apples.
- First-aid kit:
Aspirin/Tylenol/ibuprofen, Band-Aids, etc.
- Can opener, if you have cans to open
- Flashlights with extra batteries
- Battery-powered lantern
- Digital camera
- Disposable camera
- Notebooks, pens and pencils, in a Ziploc bag
- Pencil sharpener
- Clothes and toiletries for five days, with extra T-shirts, sweatshirts and socks.
- Anything (T-shirt, cap, denim shirt) with the Observer logo
- NC/SC map
- Observer ID and your business cards
- Portable radio and extra batteries
- Cooler to fill with ice
- Towels
- Rope
- Roll of toilet paper
- Jumper cables
- Fix-a-flat
- Cash