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## SPECIAL REPORT

# Researching and Interviewing: Eight Secrets to Surefire Sleuthing for Incisive Details, Color and Quotes



By Rose Marie Burke

The Ultimate Travel Writer's Workshop  
American Writers & Artists Inc.

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## About the Author

Rose Marie Burke fell in love with France on her first trip to Paris in 1977. Her career in journalism began in the U.S. with Dow Jones newswires and the Wall Street Journal, and continued after moving to Paris in 1994.

Since then, Rose has been freelancing with such national periodicals as the Wall Street Journal, Business Week, the Washington Post, and USA Today, and special-interest publications like France Today and Paris Notes. Her other professional activities include teaching travel and feature writing, and organizing the annual Paris Writers Workshop. For more information: [www.rosemarieburke.info](http://www.rosemarieburke.info).

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# Eight Secrets to Surefire Sleuthing



So you want to write a terrific travel story?

To create any excellent product, you'll need to track down the best parts. To make a cake that creates a sensation, for example, you go directly to a mill for the best and freshest flour ... or even take a trip to France for its tiny, savory walnuts.

You visit a specialty store for vanilla bean pods ... or travel to Madagascar for nutmeg. You whip up an attractive frosting and choose an elegant final touch -- maybe just a fresh flower or a snow of powdered sugar. To present the dessert, you select a plate in a complementary color.

To write a sensational travel story, you go on a similar hunt for the best of ingredients: the basic bare facts and two main kinds of mix-ins: color and quotes.

Let me talk a little bit more about those ingredients before I show you how to find them.

## What Exactly Is "Color?"

Color is the more general term. It's a word non-fiction editors use a lot. Fiction writers call it "setting" and "character." Just like the best fiction writing, the best travel writing tries to set a scene. Scene-setting is a great way to begin a story. I used the technique to start a story for the Wall Street Journal Europe on cooking classes in Paris:

"Whisking eggs and sugar for the filling of a tarte au citron is Paul Beatty, one of the more eager student cooks preparing a five-course

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French lunch in Paris. Chef Samira Hradsky cuts in. 'Not like that, like this,' she says in English, correcting his back-and-forth sweeps with large circular strokes."

Color can also mean the precise details of a place: "the gold-lamé sparkle of the Eiffel Tower at night." Or, the thick description of people. Be sensitive, though and avoid stereotypes. Remember, your color is another person's culture!

Color includes quotes: what people say or tell you, enclosed in quotation marks. Quotes instantly give a story interest, and for three reasons.

- The first is we are always interested in what experts or "real people" have to say on a subject. We're looking for frank and funny talk.
- Second, those "quote marks" physically break up the text. They give us a break from all of those letters. It adds emphasis -- like hyphens or boldfacing.
- The third reason is editors like them. Yes, your boss. Some editors even have a rule of at least one colorful quote per story.

Now don't confuse all of these lush sensual descriptions and wry remarks with "fluff." All of these ingredients have to come together to make a substantial cake.

Fluff is the icing without the cake. Editors and readers can't be fooled with it and they certainly won't buy it. Maybe in their summer beach novel, but not in a travel story that's supposed to inform as well as entertain.

In other words, you want quotes and color that tell your story. Anything else is superfluous.

### Make Sure Your Research Expedition is Targeted

So, to get back to our topic, how do you get incisive quotes and color? It's in the reporting and interviewing -- we've all had experience with that.

Your goal, however, is not to drag the net and find tons of information on the Internet, but to go on a targeted expedition to track down the best ingredients at their source.

To help you on your quest for a colorful, informative travel story, I'll let you in on my eight secrets to surefire sleuthing:

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Secret No. 1: Trite but true: know what you're looking for. Start with a story idea. As you gather information, you'll define or revise or solidify your idea.

Rosey the reporter has a story idea: cooking classes in Europe. She was talking to someone who sold homemade truffles for charity in Paris. The woman said it was a sideline. She's actually a chef who gives cooking lessons in her own kitchen for tourists.

Rosey surfs the net and finds thousands of courses. She needs a more focused idea. Hmm. What Samira is talking about are really à la carte classes in private homes. They are a way to get a real taste of native home cooking without great expense or time commitment.

Rosey wants to do a first-person piece and talks with her editor. Her editor, however, wants something between a "trend story" and a "service article" -- a third-person piece with quotes from participants and how-to information for readers.

Secret No. 2: Be prepared, but don't spend too much time on historical, statistical and general information.

Rosey had already participated in two cooking demonstrations at the Cordon Bleu, so she knew what the gold standard was. She had also taken a private class in Paris geared to expatriates to the city. So she felt prepared to do this story, without much ado.

Secret No. 3: Do, before departure, contact a chatty source at your destination "on background."

Rosey surfs the Net, trying to find other cooking classes like Samira's within travel distance of Paris. She books three make-your-own-lunch classes with three different instructions. That should be enough variety, Rosey thinks.

In response to her questions, one chef goes overboard and sends loads of information, along with the calendar of classes. Rosey spots a tart-making class. Hmmmm. Something a little bit different - and that should appeal to readers! She rebooks to take the tart class.

Secret No. 4: On the ground, track down good, live people to interview - sources of the best kind!

Rosey goes to Samira's market visit and cooking class with notebook in hand. Our Ace Reporter obviously takes notes about what transpires. There are great handouts, so that helps a lot. But she is also discreetly looking for those quotes and for participants to profile.

Rosey takes particular note of Richard and his girlfriend, in from the U.S. for a week. They seem like good candidates. His girlfriend gave him the course as a Christmas gift - a romantic anecdote. He's right in there, participating as much as possible. The chef corrects his whisking technique - that might be a nice detail.

At the right time, after the meal and before she has to leave, Rosey asks for everyone's email address. She doesn't want to single out Richard, that might make him feel uncomfortable. The next day, she emails Richard and asks him three questions, and one for each of the two others.

She took down lots of great quotes by the chef during the class, so she may not need an interview. Anyhow, she knows she can interview the chef formally later, if needed.

Secret No. 5: While on the scene, snoop around for information. Pick up the local paper. Without notebook, chitchat with fellow travelers. Ask them why they are there, how they found out about the destination. Belly up to a native bar and talk to the locals ... eavesdrop if you're shy.

At Samira's house, Rosey spots a book about French cheeses by publisher DK and makes a note of it. The chef says she's using it too bone up. Rosey has seen it before and forgot the reference. Now she has it. Point of irony: It's written by Japanese authors! Might be a story idea ...

Secret No. 6: Seek out an expert who can back up your story's idea.

Rosey instinctively knew these à la carte private cooking classes were a new trend. But she needed a qualified expert or official to verify that in print. Who could she try? Maybe someone at the website -- The International Kitchen -- that markets Samira's classes. A person there could talk about Web traffic and bookings. And maybe they know someone. Maybe a tourism official? Someone at the Office of Tourism in Paris? They are not very helpful ... This is not going to be the easy part!

Secret No. 7: After your first draft, don't hesitate to do more research or carry out more interviews. You will find holes in your story. Don't be tempted to make things up. It's never too late to ask! One more good reason to draft the story a week or days before deadline!

Weeks go by before Rosey sits down to write her story. It's not how she likes to do things but c'est la vie. She usually likes to transcribe her scribbles quickly, but didn't get a chance. It's difficult to piece those quotes back together. Still, Rosey feels she has all the basic elements of

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her story, and sits down to write. Uh-oh, she doesn't have any background information on Françoise, the quiet chef ... and no good quotes. She'll have to give her a call.

Secret No. 8: Check and recheck the "facts" -- it's never too late.

Rosey is writing on deadline. She hates that pressure. It's now time to ship the story. She presses the button with trepidation. She knows it's not perfect. However, she prints out the story and goes over it after dinner. She needed an eye break. Rosey just couldn't look at that piece for another minute more.

After dinner, she redlines the story, sees a hole, and fishes through her notes. Not there. She surfs the Web -- ugh. She'll have to call Françoise the next day. She reaches the chef and emails her editor corrections. Thank goodness the publication is a weekly and not a daily.

### How One Travel Writer Gathers Details, Color and Quotes

You can see that by continuous research and interviewing, Rosey relentlessly goes after the telling details, brilliant color and riveting quotes. Specifically she:

- Defines and identifies a trend: à la carte cooking classes chez chef in Paris.
- Compares these classes with "gold standard" one-off classes at the Cordon Bleu -- a brand many people know.
- Samples three different variations on these classes.
- Scouts around on location for real live people to interview.
- Keeps her eyes open -- she notices a book that might be another story idea.
- Seeks out just the right experts or officials to confirm that the classes are indeed a trend.
- Fills in the holes in her story with icing: more color and quotes by making more calls and writing more emails.

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# Interview Methods that Guarantee You Meaty Quotes and Fresh Views



One of the most important parts of researching -- for quotes of course, but for color and information as well -- is interviewing. It's the best way to get fresh, new views.

The Internet, books, magazine articles ... that's all well and good for what I call "background." What you need to do is check that material against what real, live people are saying.

In the story about cooking classes, Rosey -- my alter ego, incidentally -- had a hunch she was onto a trend. But she needed an expert to back her up. A source authoritatively did that in an email, which the reporter quoted:

" 'More one-day and half-day classes are now available, particularly in Europe and Asia and ... more travelers are asking for them,' says Dorlene Kaplan, Web editor for ShawGuides, a publisher that specializes in educational travel. These travelers 'don't want a week or even a weekend course but prefer to integrate a class into their schedule of a variety of nontouristy activities,' she adds."

## 12 Tips for Generating Great Quotes

To get people talking to get great quotes, try some of my 12 tips. Some of them may be obvious -- and serve as good reminders. Others are less so. I've underlined the tips that need explanation, and go more into them later.

Tip No. 1) Decide who to interview and what's most important to ask.

Tip No. 2) Don't hesitate to ask for interviews.

- Tip No. 3) Schedule interviews in advance of your trip.
- Tip No. 4) Approach your interview like a conversation.
- Tip No. 5) Come with the right equipment -- pen and paper usually suffice!
- Tip No. 6) At the right time, establish what's on and off the record.
- Tip No. 7) Ask questions that require more than a "yes" or "no" answer.
- Tip No. 8) Vary your questions to gain more and better information.
- Tip No. 9) Take good notes-facts, quotes and color.
- Tip No. 10) Verify the contact information.
- Tip No. 11) Ask if and when you may follow up.
- Tip No. 12) Thank your interviewee.

### How to Keep the "Conversation" Going

An interview is not an interrogation. It's a "human transaction," to quote one of my favorite writers about writing, William Zinsser. (I highly recommend his book *On Writing Well*.)

What in the world does a transaction have to do with it? Well, you want something -- a good story -- and the interviewee wants something too -- good press.

Sometimes it's difficult to keep the conversation going. In that case, I pull on techniques I've borrowed from watching the TV news:

- "The Nod"
- "Uh-huh"
- "And tell me more about that."
- "In other words, it's like ..."

Sometimes the interviewee holds forth like the Pontiff. If it's all good stuff, I just let him or her rip. If it's totally irrelevant, I let the person "tell their story" for a few minutes to gain some sympathy, and then try to steer the conversation. Sometimes it's helpful to say things like:

- "My editor wanted me to ..."

- “My readers ask me frequently about ...”
- “Condé Nast usually likes to know about ...”
- “On a related subject ...”

### How to Write Questions that Demand More Than a “Yes” or “No” Answer

If you ask questions that begin with how, are, did, will, do, you’ll get a “yes” or “no” answer. These kinds of questions are appropriate for checking information, but not for getting at juicy detail. Especially avoid “loaded” questions, which assume you know the answer already -- when you don’t. They can put people on the defensive.

“So how many people can fit in your kitchen -- it’s kinda small?”

Instead, ask questions that require an explanation. These usually begin with what, why and tell.

“Why do you limit your class size to eight people?”

### Three Techniques to Generate Better Questions

It’s always a good idea to prepare for an interview -- especially a formal, sit-down affair with a bigwig -- with a list of questions. I’m sure you can generate an adequate list by sitting down for a few minutes and thinking about it, but you can do a better job and come up with a variety of question by using three techniques -- some better known than the others.

They’re easy to remember, so even if you’re interviewing a regular Joe off the cuff, you’ll be able to recall them to use on the spot.

#### 1. The 5Ws and the H (or, what I learned in J-school.)

These questions are great for news stories and covering the basics.

- Who?  
Who are the key players in this cooking class? Who does the teaching? Who does the marketing?
- What?  
What kind of cooking classes are they -- demonstration or hands-on classes?

- Where?  
Where exactly do they take place? At the chef's home? A dedicated kitchen studio that the chef rents?
- When?  
How often are these classes offered?
- Why?  
Why were these classes created and for whom?
- How?  
How does the chef manage to host, teach and prepare a three-course meal in the space of four hours and still keep a clean kitchen?

## 2. The GOAL Technique

These kinds of questions are perfect for profiles of people and their companies.

- What is your Goal?
  - What do you hope to teach participants in each class?
- What Obstacles are in the way?
  - What are the obstacles to expanding your business?
- What are you hoping to Achieve?
  - What do you want to achieve with these classes?
- How does this fit with your Long-term objectives?
  - Do you see yourself doing this for the rest of your life?

## 3. The Sova Checklist

The Sova method is excellent at helping you form questions that result in lots of detail and information. It's great for a comprehensive feature story. (I found out about this technique through Jen, who herself read about it in a book by Dawn Sova, *How to Write Articles for Newspapers and Magazines*.)

Use this checklist to see whether you're asking for:

- Historic information
  - How long have you been in the business? How long have there been cooking classes chez chef in Paris?

- Clarification of an issue
  - So participants do more watching than actual cooking?
- Verification of information
  - So you're not a graduate of a cooking school yourself?
- Reaction to a statement made by you or someone else
  - Paul told me that he enjoyed your hospitality more than anything else - even the cooking tips. Is that the sense you get from most of your clients?
- Projections about the future
  - Do you believe your cooking school business will grow? How many more clients could you handle?
- Descriptions and opinions
  - Your cooking classes are marketed under the name "Food Unites the World." Could you tell me why? Tell me what makes your classes different from others being held in Paris.

### Take Notes About More Than Just What's Said

When you're taking notes, let your mind creatively stray from the interview or information gathering at hand. Try this palette of techniques to take better notes that will make for a more colorful story:

- Use your senses to describe what you see, hear, smell, feel.
- Note anything that makes you laugh or cry.
- Note down any moment where you felt tension, conflict, or where you were provoked or shocked.
- Take down stories or anecdotes -- what's happening to real people.
- Scribble or sketch -- sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words.

### Approach Your Story More Like an Artist Than a Journalist

Actually, when you stalk the travel or feature story, you should feel less like a journalist and more like an artist. If you use the dry approach to researching and interviewing, your story will turn out dry. If you take a more creative approach to the process, your story will be all the better for it. And it's a whole lot more fun, too.

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Interviewing, for example, is like being the hostess at a party where you're answering the door, introducing people and cooking at the same time. It's a constant juggle.

You're trying to put your source at ease with a smile and reassuring body language, jotting down the response to the last question while hearing the response to the current one and thinking about the next. Meanwhile, your tape recorder stops working ...

How to cope? You will miss something. But hopefully nothing too important...

### Two Strategies for "Juggling" Your Notes, Conversation and Observations During an Interview

One strategy is to regroup or catch up when your source is taking a call, or is interrupted, or is rambling on about nothing.

Take time to look around the place and get some local color. What does the office look like? The destination, the people -- are they in a good mood? What's the landscape look like? What's that telephone call about anyhow -- eavesdrop.

The other strategy is to relax. If you're "into" the interview you'll be amazed at how you can reconstruct color, details -- even quotes -- based on the barest of notes. And, it gets easier with practice.

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# The Final Product: How the Paris Cooking Story Turned Out



Here's how my article on Paris cooking classes came out. Try to find the color, quotes -- and information.

This is a service piece, so there is more information than in a destination article.

Still, I couldn't serve it dry ...

Where have I set a scene -- character, plot, setting, tension -- or used an anecdote? Used sensory information? Humor or wordplay? Lastly, is it a palatable article? Does it leave you salivating at the chance to try out a class yourself?

## Courses at Paris Homes Offer Convivial Culinary Experiences

By ROSE MARIE BURKE  
SPECIAL TO THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Whisking eggs and sugar for the filling of a tarte au citron is Paul Beatty, one of the more eager student cooks preparing a five-course French lunch in Paris. Chef Samira Hradsky cuts in. "Not like that, like this," she says in English, correcting his back-and-forth sweeps with large circular strokes.

Mr. Beatty, an Oracle Corp. consultant, came with his girlfriend Debbi Waterman, both traveling from Cromwell, Connecticut. Ms. Waterman, a podiatrist, gave Mr. Beatty two cooking classes with Ms. Hradsky as a Christmas gift.

They are taking part in a growing niche in culinary tourism -- a la carte cooking classes chez chef (in the cook's own kitchen). Though there are one-off

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courses in many European countries, Paris as a city offers the widest choice by far. Demand in Europe is keeping in step with a drastic increase in these kinds of culinary experiences over the past few years.

"More one-day and half-day classes are now available, particularly in Europe and Asia and ... more travelers are asking for them," says Dorlene Kaplan, Web editor for ShawGuides, a publisher that specializes in educational travel. These travelers "don't want a week or even a weekend course but prefer to integrate a class into their schedule of a variety of nontouristy activities," she adds.

To get a flavor for these courses in Paris, Personal Journal sampled three different kinds: a lunch class, a class that pairs a market visit and lunch, and a tarte-making class.

Intimacy is a key ingredient. The classes take place in a private apartment or sometimes a studio apartment converted into a large kitchen classroom, as opposed to a theater kitchen at a school or restaurant, so the maximum number of students is low -- eight people with Ms. Hradsky to 15 with Francoise Meunier, another cooking instructor. The three courses we tried are taught in either English or, in the case of Ms. Meunier, in French with English or Spanish translations, as needed.

Be warned that these private lessons are literally a cottage industry and aren't regulated. For the classes we took, teachers' credentials varied from degreed to largely self-taught, but all demonstrated mastery of classic French cooking techniques. How to know if your cook isn't a fake? Ask for references or memberships in such organizations as the International Association of Culinary Professionals.

The classes in France aren't just about the native nutrition. Ms. Meunier has classes this fall featuring Asian and Italian foods popular in France; Ms. Hradsky offers lessons in cuisine from 10 countries and regions of the world. Most of the attendees at the lessons we took found the classes through the Internet, at sites such as The International Kitchen at <http://www.theinternationalkitchen.com/1> and ShawGuides at <http://cookforfun.shawguides.com/2>. Others heard about the classes through word of mouth or mentions in the media.

The classes in Paris, somewhere between hands-on and demonstration courses, add participation -- to taste. Since none of the kitchens have individual stations, students pitch in as much as they like (or not at all) around one or two cooking islands.

The premise of the courses is practicality. The chefs know and teach classic French cooking techniques. But they also share practical shortcuts and everyday tips. Francoise Richard, for example, showed the class how to use a whisk instead of a spatula to more quickly and better fold egg whites into a soufflé batter.

The gut-level appeal of the programs is that at the finish, participants sit down to a full meal or tasting, not just a sampling. Presentation and table service, and sometimes even cleanup, are part of the experience.

The icing on the cake, however, is that these classes don't feel like school. No tests are given, no diplomas are handed out, just copies of recipes along with big helpings of hospitality. These short culinary courses in French cuisine are more like a convivial dinner party where the guests are invited to do the cooking.

### **La Table de Francoise**

Lunch

**On the menu:** salade d'épinards, veau aux capres and soufflé au Grand Marnier

**The chef:** Francoise Richard, native of St.-Etienne, taught by her grand-mère

**Where:** a private apartment in the 17th arrondissement

**Class notes:** Like most of Ms. Richard's menu, this supper is fit for Sunday or company dinner, and mixes easy and challenging courses. Since the chef lived in Montreal for 11 years, she speaks fluent English and knows her audience, mostly from the U.S. Eight people attended the class the day we went.

The kitchen is outfitted with standard appliances, each with their own quirks -- just like the average home kitchen. One type of wine, matched to the menu, which is different every week, is included with the meal. Pam Buckner, an American, acts as Ms. Richard's assistant in the kitchen and bubbly co-hostess at the table.

**To reserve:** contact Ms. Buckner at bucknerlevine@compuserve.com<sup>3</sup> or tel. 33-1-47-66-06-52 (also fax). Classes are offered 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday, October-June. Price: \$54.66 or €50 per class.

### **Food Unites the World Cooking School**

Market visit and lunch

**On the menu:** Smoked salmon mousse with leek sauce, grilled fresh salmon with ginger sauce, basmati rice, lamb Provencal with black olives, baby baked potatoes with perfumed olive oil and herbes de Provence, cheese plate and mixed greens dressed with raspberry vinaigrette, tarte au citron.

**The chef:** Samira Hradsky, who has a Ph.D. in education, is mainly a self-taught cook. She has taken classes with the big cooking schools in Paris such as the Cordon Bleu, mostly to check out the competition, she says.

**Where:** Chef's private apartment in the 16th arrondissement

**Class Notes:** Ms. Hradsky, who teaches world cuisine, was born in Jordan and lived in the U.S. for many years. The day starts at 8:30 a.m. near the Arc de Triomphe for a visit to the Poncelet outdoor market, where the chef purchases ingredients for the day's meal -- appropriate for a dinner party. Her newly remodeled kitchen is small but offered two or three people the opportunity to participate, from the class of six that day.

Most of the American clients, however, seemed happy to listen to Ms. Hradsky's many tales and tips. The chef serves the meal in her formal dining room, where classmates enjoyed getting to know one another. Red and white wines are served.

**To reserve:** Visit <http://www.foodunitestheworld.com/4>, tel. 33-1-45-00-08-31, or the booking agent at <http://5>, tel. 1-312-726-4525.

**Class schedule:** 8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. daily upon request, starting Sept. 8. Price: \$180 (€166) per market visit and lunch class.

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**Francoise Meunier Cours de Cuisine (Courses in French Cuisine)**

Tarte-making

**On the menu:** Tarte au citron, tarte a la mangue et cardamome and tarte aux pommes grand-mere.

**The chef:** Francoise Meunier was born in Rouen, schooled at L'Ecole Hoteliere de Toulouse and has many years of experience in the restaurant and hotel industry.

**Where:** Chef's studio kitchen in the 2nd arrondissement

**Class Notes:** Ms. Meunier's was the most serious and hands-on of the three. Each participant, for example, made and prepared a crust and received feedback from the chef. The kitchen is also the biggest of the three, with two large work surfaces. The class of 12 people was the most international, coming from Columbia, Trinidad, Britain, Italy, the U.S. and Paris itself.

While only three tartes were on the day's menu, Ms. Meunier also added banana and chocolate -- the class favorite -- and showed how to make almond cookies with leftover dough. The tarte-making class is just one of the chef's special classes on a theme. She also offers lessons in full-course meals.

**To reserve:** Visit [http://online.wsj.com/article\\_print/www.fmeunier.com6](http://online.wsj.com/article_print/www.fmeunier.com6), tel. 33-140-26-14-00. Lunch classes 10:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday; classes on a theme 2:30-5:30 p.m. Tuesday (e-mail for exact dates). Classes run September-June. Price: €90 for one lesson, €360 for five.