

# **Saying the Quiet Part Loud: Introverts Can Be Journalists**

A Guide by Courtney Bubl 

# Foreword

Whether you are just beginning your journalism career or are an industry veteran, I hope you benefit from this guide produced as my final project for my Poynter-Koch's Media and Journalism Fellowship. If you're an introvert and feel, specifically, like you're alone in the industry, know that you aren't.

--Courtney Bubl 

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# Introduction

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In September 2015, Irving Washington, then deputy director at the Online News Association [published a blog](#) that aimed to help introverted attendees in navigating ONA's highly popular annual conference.

“As a self-proclaimed introvert, I know that in large crowds we can be the life of the party or the quietest person in the room,” wrote Washington, who went on to become ONA's executive director and CEO. “As a PSA to our extroverted friends, introversion has nothing to do with shyness or social awkwardness — if I had a dime for every time someone doubted my introversion, I'd be rich — but more to do with our response to stimulation and need for renewal.” ONA has since reshared the blog for subsequent conferences.

Three years before Washington's blog, Susan Cain released “Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking,” which became a *New York Times* best seller and received various awards and accolades.

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In preparation for this guide, I revisited my copy of “Quiet,” filled with notes and post-its from my junior year of high school when I used it for a reading assignment, now – gasp – a decade ago. Paging through it brought back memories of when I first put a finger on things I had been thinking and feeling for my then 17 years of life. Before we dive in, an excerpt from that book is an insightful and informational starting point. Regarding the meaning of introversion, Cain writes the following:

*There are almost as many definitions of introvert and extrovert as there are personality psychologists.... Still today's psychologists tend to agree on several important points: for example, that introverts and extroverts differ in the level of outside stimulation that they need to function well. Introverts feel 'just right' with less stimulation.... Introverts often work more slowly and deliberately.... Introverts, in contrast [to extraverts], may have strong social skills and enjoy parties and business meetings, but after a while wish they were home in their pajamas. They prefer to devote social energies to close friends, colleagues and family. They listen more than they talk, think before they speak and often feel as if they express themselves better in writing than in conversation. They tend to dislike conflict. Many have a horror of small talk, but enjoy deep discussion.*

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Cain underscored additionally what introverts don't have to be:

*The word introvert is not a synonym for hermit or misanthrope. Introverts can be these things, but most are perfectly friendly.... Nor are introverts necessarily shy. Shyness is the fear of social disapproval or humiliation, while introversion is a preference for environments that are not overstimulating.... One reason that people confuse the two concepts is that they sometimes overlap.*

Finally, she notes that there is diversity within introverts and extroverts:

*"Introversion and extroversion interact with our other personality traits and personal histories, producing widely different kinds of people."*

With that basic understanding, let's get started!

**“100% Introverts Can Be Journalists”**

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“100% journalists can be introverts,” Irving Washington told me. He is now a senior fellow at the Kaiser Family Foundation. In fact, he thinks there are more introverted journalists than extroverted ones, something he says he might not have said earlier in his career.

“At the end of the day, it's not necessarily about how outgoing you are,” said Washington. “One of the things introverts do really well is connect with people and I think a lot of introverts look for meaning. And I think when you’re telling stories, having a mindset of connection and meaning, makes for more powerful stories.”

Karl Moore, a professor at McGill University who has done extensive research on introverts, extroverts and ambiverts (a combination of the former two), said, “being introverted is a good thing for a journalist.... Your job is to listen, to connect dots, not to jump to judgment, but to get to the real truth of the matter.” Nonetheless, he acknowledged it might be more advantageous for a print journalist than a television journalist.

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According to Carmen Nobel, program director at The Journalist's Resource, an informational project of the Harvard Kennedy School that researches newsy topics, introverts may be able to get better stories because they "are comfortable being quiet and absorbing information."

For Bill Grueskin, professor of professional practice at the Columbia Journalism School, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Robert Caro said it best: the best way to interview is to just "shut up!"

Tanya Ballard Brown, executive editor at *Government Executive* (and my boss), said she hopes "no one would decide against the journalism career because they aren't a people person, as there are so many roles [including] design, product, copyediting, line editing, etc. that don't require you to regularly interact with strangers or be public facing."



# Insight and Strategies

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The folks mentioned earlier in this guide offered the following advice to introverted journalists:

- Sometimes you have to act like an extrovert to do the job. If you do, however, make sure to take a break to recharge – Karl Moore, McGill University
- Holding a notebook can make you feel comfortable and authoritative – Carmen Nobel, The Journalist’s Resource
- If you’re intimidated about shouting questions at a press conference, think about the importance of your story – Irving Washington, Kaiser Family Foundation

In addition to these experts, I asked journalists who identify as introverts to share their strategies to excel in journalism.

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At big events where the press is not welcome, “I can use my camera as a shield – it gives me a reason to be there and allows me to focus on one thing instead of the hectic environment... allowing myself to fade into the background, but in a way that allows me to do my job really well!” – *Evan L’Roy, photographer at The Texas Tribune*

“Give yourself some grace – there are lots of other introverts and that person you are nervous about approaching might be nervous too. Over prepare for interviews and speaking engagements. When I have to do a speaking event, I always make a crib note with keywords I can glance at if I get nervous and start rambling to help me get back on focus. During meetings I will take notes even if I don't need to do so just so that I can calm my nerves.” – *Tanya Ballard Brown, executive editor at Government Executive*

“Line up one-on-one meetings over coffees and lunch with contacts as that can lead to other introductions at events with larger numbers of people in attendance.” – *Ross Wilkers, reporter at Washington Technology*

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“The most important thing to me is to force yourself out of your comfort zone. In my case that meant lining up interviews that I was nervous about conducting and going through with them anyway. I also learned over time that it doesn't help to over prepare. If the interviewee thinks you're already very knowledgeable about the subject at hand, it makes for a less interesting conversation. People talk more freely when they're trying to explain things to someone,” – *Tom Shoop, editor-at-large at Government Executive*

“Set yourself reasonable goals. I used to think if I went to a networking event I had to speak to most attendees, and anything less would be a failure. Now I figure if I meet, say, three new people at one of those events, it's a success. Then I reward myself with an Irish exit and go home.” – *Chris Teale, reporter at GCN, who has been described as an “ambivert.”*

“It's okay to call someone back to ask follow-up questions, or to gear yourself up to be a little tougher the second time around,” – *Kirstyn Brendlen, digital editor/reporter at Brooklyn Paper*

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“Make yourself uncomfortable. I hate cold-calling people and walking up to lawmakers and talking to them unprompted, but after a while it becomes second nature. You just have to force yourself to do it and work through the awkwardness of it, and you'll get a lot better at it.” – *Edward Graham, reporter at NextGov*

“Try to make as many connections as you possibly can. Even if a connection starts over LinkedIn or Twitter (a preferred written platform) rather than at an in-person event (a less-preferred spoken situation), it can lead to a bigger network and better sources. If you know your stuff and leave an impression, they'll also be likely to remember you and reach out if they have a good lead on a story.” – *Drew Friedman, reporter at Federal News Network*

“Even if you're worried to ask a source a tough question, do it anyway. It won't be as bad as you think it'll be. It's also okay to contact sources over email to schedule a future interview. You don't always have to contact people by phone.” – *Anne Snabes, reporter at the Herald-Tribune*

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“Lean into your strength of being an active and perceptive listener while doing interviews and use that to boost your confidence.” – *Grace Panetta, reporter at The 19th*

“Being an introvert actually is helpful in the process of writing. I can stay focused and I am not tempted to join other people until my work is finished. I am happy in my own company.” – *Micheline Maynard, contributing columnist for The Washington Post*

“Experiment to find the balance between time to yourself and time in the field, networking, etc. You don't have to do everything, but you can do some things and still find the time to recharge. And put those recharge times on your calendar.” – *Gretchen Gavett, senior editor at the Harvard Business Review*

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Finally, for those extroverts that are graciously reading this guide, here is some advice on working with introverts:

- Managers should be aware why people do not speak up in meetings. – Irving Washington
- Give introverts time to prepare for a meeting. – Karl Moore
- Have awareness of everyone's strengths, and introverts can teach extroverts to listen better. – Carmen Nobel

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## About Courtney

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Courtney Publé grew up on Long Island in New York. She came to Washington, D.C. to attend The George Washington University (2014-2018) then never left. She worked for NBC News right out of college, then in July 2019 became a reporter for *Government Executive*, where she covers all things federal government and is a frequent guest on her publication's podcast. In 2022, Courtney won the American Society of Business Publication Editors' Young Leaders Scholarship and was selected for the Poynter-Koch Media and Journalism Fellowship for 2022-2023.

When she's not writing and reporting, she enjoys reading; hanging out with her parents, friends, family and boyfriend; exercising; listening to Taylor Swift; traveling; and cheering on the New York Giants.