In-depth stories on a deadline

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Most reporters these days have little time for lengthy investigative stories. But adding depth to a daily or weekend story can be pretty easy — if you know where to look.
State of Wisconsin resources

The legislative, executive and judicial branches of Wisconsin government all maintain databases and resources that can be tapped on deadline. Some are easy to navigate; others take some practice.
**Wisconsin Legislature** website

Bills, laws, administrative rules, veto messages, attorney general opinions can be found [here](#). Sign up to track the progress of bills [here](#). Search the entire website [here](#).

Answer questions such as: Has the Legislature ever tried to regulate drones? **Yup!**
Legislative service agencies

The Legislature has four service agencies that provide information to lawmakers and the public.

They are the Legislative Reference Bureau, Legislative Fiscal Bureau, Legislative Council and the Legislative Audit Bureau.
The Legislative Reference Bureau has a wealth of information on bills, including drafting records, state programs and the history and impact of state legislation.

Its reference librarians can be reached at 608-266-0341 or lrb.reference@legis.wi.gov.
Legislative Reference Bureau resources

What are examples of what you can find?
A history of redistricting in Wisconsin.
A summary of legislation in the last session.
Files used to draft bills.
The Blue Book, packed with useful information including official biographies and election totals over time.
Reference Bureau

key to this quick-hit story

Using drafting files, I showed that a multimillionaire had written a controversial bill to reduce his child support.
Legislative Fiscal Bureau

The Fiscal Bureau maintains a wealth of reports on state spending. For example: The history of tax credit program for the poor Taxes on alcohol and tobacco in Wisconsin Wisconsin’s school choice program UW System tuition Everything about the state budget.
The Legislative Council serves as Legislature’s law firm. But it also maintains a wealth of information on its website for the public. Most helpful is the Legislative study committee sites. All testimony, reports and data submitted to these committees is posted on the website. It’s a great way to find people knowledgeable about issues being debated in the state.
Recent legislative study committees

Alcohol Beverages Enforcement
Bail and Conditions of Pretrial Release
Child Placement and Support
Direct Primary Care
Minor Guardianships
Property Tax Assessment Practices
Identification and Management of Dyslexia
Investment and Use of the School Trust Funds
Use of Police Body Cameras
Special Committee on State-Tribal Relations
The Legislative Audit Bureau peeks behind the veil of state government. As an independent, nonpartisan body, it is a source of authoritative information. If you heard that the Wisconsin Economic Development Corp. failed to verify promised jobs in exchange for taxpayer money or that lottery sales are up a bit, chances are that’s the work of the LAB.
Executive

The executive branch of state government consists of many agencies and departments. Most agencies under Gov. Scott Walker had a policy of only allowing press access to spokespeople. The atmosphere appears somewhat looser under Gov. Tony Evers. Here is a list of agency contacts.
Department of Administration

What kind of information can you find on the DOA website:

Current population estimates
Governor’s proposed budget
State building projects, including UW
Decisions of the Division of Hearings and Appeals
Department of Natural Resources

Drinking water quality database
When are the hunting seasons?
Number and location of frac sand mining facilities in Wisconsin
Proposed new DNR rules
Department of Health Services

Is the local nursing home **safe**?

What was the **most common cause of death** in Wisconsin in 2016?

How many children have been diagnosed with **lead poisoning** in Wisconsin?

How many people receive **BadgerCare**?

Is **food stamp usage** in the state up or down?
Elections and Ethics commissions

Campaign Finance Information System (CFIS)

Current and past elections results

Lobbyists and who/what they’re lobbying for

Officials’ financial disclosure forms
Other agencies

Department of Public Instruction
[Data and Media page]
Wisconsin Economic Development Corp. list of [awards and grants]
Department of Transportation [crash statistics]
Department of Safety and Professional Services, [licenses] and [disciplinary actions]
Department of Corrections [inmate locator]
The Wisconsin Circuit Court Access database is the go-to resource for most reporters. The Wisconsin Supreme Court and Court of Appeals case access has full briefs and decisions. The Wisconsin Judicial Commission site lists good judges gone bad. Check the Office of Lawyer Regulation for rogue lawyers.
CCAP tricks

Use the advanced search function to find how many similar cases have been filed. For example, you can search for tickets (FO cases) issued by the state Department of Natural Resources in Columbia County in 2016. How many were there? 158. Set up an RSS feed for cases you’re tracking.
PACER: Federal court database

PACER (Public Access to Court Electronic Records) is a great resource for obtaining briefs and lawsuits filed in federal court.

This is a fee service but costs are modest: 10 cents a page for a maximum $3 per document. Sign up for an account here.
Useful non-governmental resources

National Conference of State Legislatures
Kids Forward
Wisconsin Democracy Campaign
The Wheeler Report for press releases by agencies, elected officials and candidates.
WisBar.org lawyer lookup
Check WisconsinEye for video/audio of committee hearings, press conferences, etc.
How to find quick in-depth stories?

They come from a variety of sources:

**Personal observation:** This doesn’t look right.

**Complaints** from individuals or groups about the way a government program works — or doesn’t.

Follow stories past the initial tip or observation. Often that’s how reporters get the best stories.
How to do a ‘quick hit?’

Start collecting records and sources
Keep doing your regular beat or general assignment duties while collecting material
Once you’ve pulled everything together, carve out some time to write the story
Consider breaking a series of stories and not just one huge investigation
Watch as the additional tips pour in
Keep investigating until all relevant questions are answered.
Use WCIJ!

The Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism’s mission is to increase the quality and quantity of investigative reporting in Wisconsin and beyond. Contact Andy Hall to receive our free stories at ahall@wisconsinwatch.org.

For advice on reporting, email me at dhall@wisconsinwatch.org.